

THE FARAWAY PALADIN

The Torch Port Ensemble

IV

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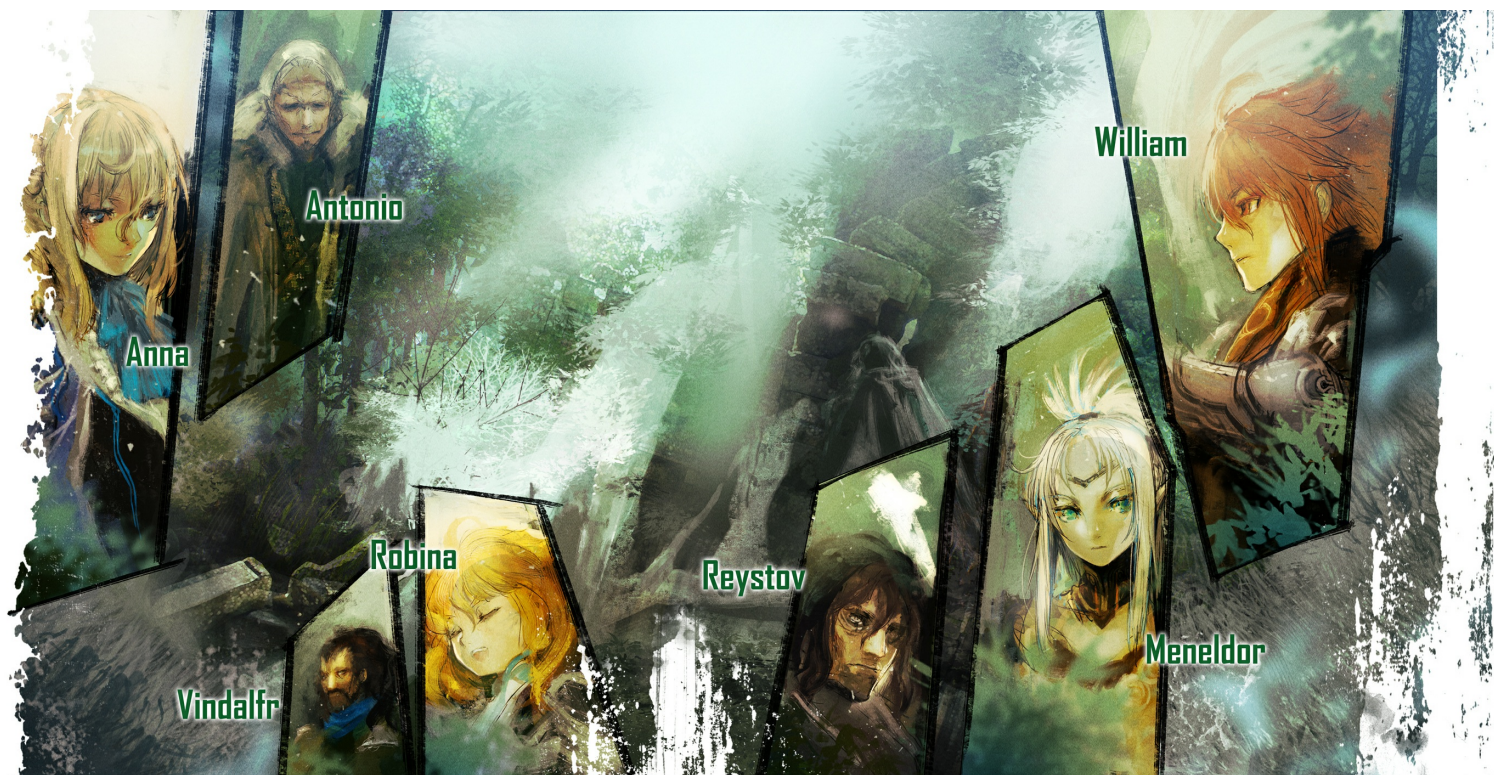
A crowd of Torch port

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THE FARAWAY PALADIN IV. THE TORCH PORT ENSEMBLE





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He who sows seeds in the wilderness,
 I count his deeds for righteousness.
He who makes rope and kneads clay,
 I count his deeds for righteousness.
He who makes peace between people,
 I count his deeds for righteousness.
He who prays for others to be blessed,
 I count his deeds for righteousness.

All people in the four quarters of the world have their endeavors;
 I love and protect them.
All people in the four quarters of the world have their endeavors;
 I praise and cherish them.

— Blessing of Volt, God of Judgment and Lightning

A dark, atmospheric illustration in a painterly style. A hand emerges from the center, holding a glowing, cylindrical lantern that casts a bright, ethereal light. The background is a swirling, stormy mass of dark, swirling shapes, possibly representing a storm or a chaotic environment. The overall tone is somber and mysterious, with a focus on the light from the lantern as a source of hope or guidance.

1: A Tale of the Paladin and the Past

It was the kind of night in spring when the cold air had lost its edge and green grass seemed to grow in the span of a single evening. The office was lit up by the brilliant glow of a lantern. What was inside the lantern was not wavering fire, but a pure-white shell with a character engraved upon it: *Lumen*, meaning “light.”

Under the lantern’s light, I untied the hemp cord that bound together a sheaf of papers and spread them across my desk. This was not the paper from my previous world, dazzlingly white, thin enough to turn with a fingertip, and smooth to the touch. It was a pale-yellow ochre like fallen leaves in autumn, too off-color to call plain white, and had a rugged and substantial thickness that reminded me of construction paper from my previous world. It had a rough texture and fuzzy edges. It was, in short, coarse paper. It might have received a passing grade by the standards of this age, but even so, it couldn’t have been called “good paper” by any stretch of the imagination.

Smiling, I played with the paper, turning the pages, bending them, and holding them up to the lantern so the light shone through. Then I ran my fingers over the pages a few times to check their texture.

“Doesn’t take much to put you in a good mood, huh, Will?”

I could sense the grin before I even looked. On the other side of the desk, sitting in the chair for guests, was my close friend Meneldor. The last time I looked, he was scraping a reed with the knife in his hand, but apparently he’d started watching me at some point. He was leaned way back in the chair, looking at me with his head at an angle. His silver hair cascaded over his shoulders, revealing his white forehead and nape and the pointed ears that were characteristic of half-elves. His jade eyes sparkled, and the corners of his mouth were turned upwards into a wry smile. It was obvious he’d found something to tease me about.

I said the first thing that came to mind. “It showed that much?”

“Uh, I just watched the Dragonslaying Paladin run his hands over paper like he was caressing a woman or something. And you had a grin on your face. It didn’t take much guessing.” He looked at me in disbelief that I hadn’t realized.

“I was like that?!”

“You were.”

Apparently, I was really easy to read.

“Those the ones you were gifted by the workers?”

“Yeah. They said these were the best samples they’d produced.”

“They looked pretty happy about it.”

“Yeah...”

Everyone who had taken part in the making of this paper—humans, dwarves, elves, and halflings alike—looked very happy, from the adventurers who pushed through the woods in search of materials to the workers who actually manufactured it. Right about now, they were probably all at the workshop patting each other on the back and raising their cups to success.

Once more, I stroked the paper with love. This was the first piece of paper ever made in Torch Port.

“It’s the future of this town.”



In late autumn of my seventeenth solstice year, I fought the foul-dragon Valacirca and defeated him. Even with the help of my allies and the protection of the gods and the heroic spirits, it was a battle that brought me to the brink of defeat and drained me of everything. If I had to go back in time and do it all over, I had no confidence that I could pull it off again.

But what awaited me after defeating the dragon was no fairytale ending, no “And the paladin lived happily ever after.” Life is not fiction, and so, despite everything I’d accomplished, reality’s unremarkable days carried on just the same.

My body had absorbed dragon factor, and my beloved weapon and armor were lost forever. People were now petrified of dragons. Beasts became more active, driven mad by the foul-dragon’s howling. A tribe of forest giants made first contact with our society. I also had to deal with the isolated settlement where the people of the former land of Lothdor lived, the demons left over from the destroyed Rust Mountains, the status reports to the city of Whitesails,

the coordination with the city that was necessary to prepare for the future, and more besides.

I'd been running around dealing with these things since straight after the party celebrating the dragonslaying. Autumn and winter were very busy, but now that they had passed with hardly a flake of snow between them, I was at last getting the sense that things were starting to settle down. The day of the winter solstice—the day that added another year to everyone's age—had come and gone. Before I knew it, I was eighteen.

“This paper, the future of this town? Is it really that big a deal?”

“It is that big of a deal. If cutting down trees and floating them down the river to sell to Whitesails is all we do, then as soon as the woods around here are completely deforested, the town will die. We also got some treasure from the dragon, but someday that'll be used up as well, and throwing money around will just cause chaos anyway. We have to diversify our manufacturing steadily.”

“I get all that, seriously, but brother, there's a lot of woods to Beast Woods. We're good for now. I don't know how you have time for all this.”

“I know we're good for now. That's why I want to find some time to think of what I can do right now and get someone other than me providing them profit.”

If you gain an understanding of how things are and keep an eye on how they're changing, in a sense, it's possible to see the future. Take shifts in forest resources, for example. Once a town is built and grows to a reasonable scale, the woodland around it steadily recedes. Starting with the closest areas, large trees are used as material for all kinds of things, while small trees and branches are burned as fuel, creating areas of flat land which are then cultivated into fields. Provided with food, the town grows bigger and the forest retreats farther.

This process was an unchanging constant in both this world and my previous. And I knew that in the majority of cases, “when it's needed” was too late to start planning. I wanted to set my sights ten years into the future and have a plan in place that far in advance. I was already investing in the town's future in many ways besides papermaking, starting up all kinds of workshops—woodworking, metalcasting, leather processing, ceramics, textiles, dyes—but

was this really enough? If I was going to be rebuilding the City of the Dead that was my birth home and others even farther south, what kind of role would Torch Port be able to play in that future?

As I pondered the future of Torch Port and Beast Woods, Menel set down the dagger and the reed (the future shaft of an arrow), spun his chair around, and sat on it backwards, his arms folded on top of the backrest. And then, he sighed at me. “You know, the way you think is real elf-like sometimes.”

He was talking about the way I took the long view.

“Really? Isn’t it more that you’re just pretty hasty for someone with elf blood?”

“Not gonna deny that, but you know what they say, right? *Seize the day, for tomorrow we die.*” Those were the words of a certain poet who had been prolific in the golden days of the Union Age. Menel shrugged. “I might die tomorrow. Getting the most out of today is more important to me than gazing at a future ten years away.”

Those words, muttered quietly with a dry throat, touched a chord. *I might die tomorrow.* The words summoned memories. Menel’s sober eyes as he stood on the brink of becoming a bandit, aiming his bow at me. A village destroyed by demons and reduced to ruins. Menel sobbing in front of the ghost of the old lady to whom he owed so much.

“Most people who live out here probably think that way,” he added.

“You’re right...”

This was that kind of world, that kind of place. Death and despair attacked suddenly here, whether you were ready for them or not. Most couldn’t fight them, and everyone had their own circumstances to think about. It was shamefully rare for anyone to offer the afflicted a helping hand. The situation had improved a little in the past few years, but things were a long way from changing at a fundamental level.

None of us were unbeatable or had all the answers, and that went for Menel and me as well. There had been people we couldn’t save, tears we couldn’t hold back, things that had been lost and could never be recovered. I’d come close to

dying while fighting Valacirca just this winter and been in peril on multiple occasions in the months since as I dealt with the aftermath. I was even at death's door at one point. Defeating a fearsome dragon and gaining its power didn't give me any guarantee that my death would be any less ordinary than anyone else's. At the farthest reaches of the south, that was how things were. No one had any way of knowing if they'd still be around in ten years.

"Maybe that's why the god of the flame chose you, huh?" Menel suggested jokingly, breaking into a slight grin. "You're someone who can stand smack in the middle of the front line, where you really could die tomorrow, and suggest sowing seeds to reap ten years later."

As Menel looked at me under the light of the lantern, I felt the gentle warmth of friendship within his eyes.

"Thanks, Menel." The look and tone I responded with must have been soothing in just the same way. "But I often look too far away. If I hadn't had you to look at the closer things, the little things, and talk to me as an equal, I think I'd have tripped up somewhere by now."

When I told him how thankful I was, he snorted. "Cut that out, you're exaggerating. But yeah, autumn and winter got pretty hairy in places."

"The Invincible Giant. That was a really close one..."

"Ya, and let's not forget when you had an *actual feckin' battle* with Reystov." There was a pregnant pause. He side-eyed me. "Sure, let's send a talented warrior to the grave, it's not as if we need all the help we can get right now. What were you *thinking*?"

That had been a complicated situation, but even so, I really had no argument.

"And I heard you took Bee someplace weird."

"Th-That one wasn't actually very dangerous..."

"If you say so," he said, and sighed. "Oh, and my blood still runs cold thinking about how you fell in love."

I groaned. I had a lot of... well, a lot of regrets and reservations regarding that. "I have faith that you will come to my aid!" I proclaimed in the hope of

distracting him with positivity.

“Feck no!” he shouted back, as if he couldn’t imagine anything worse. “Don’t get me involved!”

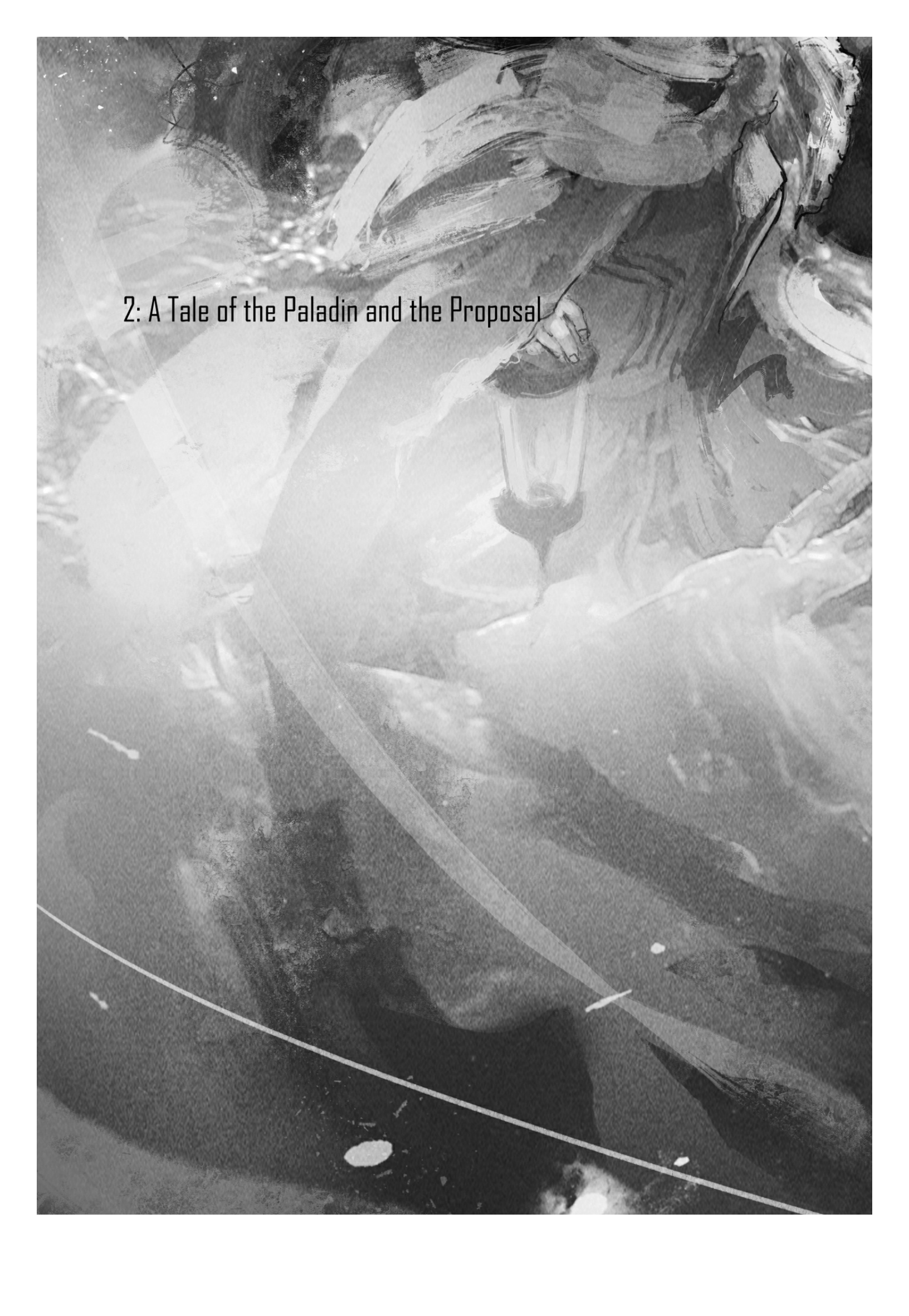
“Whaa? But we’re friends!”

“Even for friends, some things are too much to ask!”

We both laughed as we cracked wise with each other.

“If we’re going to talk about danger, what about when you...”

This winter had been a time of many adventures, both big and small. In this small moment of downtime on a spring night, we laughed and talked about our memories.

A dark, atmospheric illustration in a painterly style. A hand emerges from the center, holding a glowing, cylindrical lantern. The scene is set in a stormy, rocky landscape with swirling clouds and rain. A large, curved rock formation dominates the left side. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic. The text "2: A Tale of the Paladin and the Proposal" is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

2: A Tale of the Paladin and the Proposal

As they looked at the spear, Menel frowned, Bee's eyes sparkled, and Al looked satisfied. It was early afternoon one day in winter. Logs crackled in the fireplace in the great hall of my Torch Port mansion, where the spear rested on a large table. Their three reactions to it couldn't have been more different.

Menel rubbed his temple as though he had a headache. "Are you sure that was a good idea? That sword was a treasure they'd passed down for generations..."

The spear's blade was awfully long, and gleamed a brilliant gold. Yes, brilliant gold—this was the dwarven heirloom said to have been forged by Blaze, god of fire, that had slain the foul-dragon Valacirca: the enchanted sword Calldawn.

"And you just went and turned it into a spear?!"

I laughed nervously.

"I know you were in a fix 'cause Pale Moon broke, and I know a makeshift spear won't do the job, but who would do this?!"

"Well, it's for actual usage."

"Al, what about you, are you okay with this?!"

"It is for practical usage..."

"Like mentor, like squire..."

Of course, I hadn't gone so far as to cut the blade of the sword short, so to be precise, it was closer to a glaive than a spear. I'd gotten Al to ask the favor of the dwarven craftsmen on my behalf, and now the blade was attached to a completely different style of weapon. The near-awakening of the foul-dragon Valacirca had sent the beasts into a frenzy, and demons were running rampant as well, so acquiring a usable main weapon had been an urgent necessity.

"It is well made, I'll give you that..."

As Menel said, the glaive was made well. Just as you'd expect from dwarves, it had a pragmatic design with all excess stripped away, a sleek straight line without a single imperfection from the sharp point of the blade to the end of the shaft. I had no idea what kind of metal the golden blade had been forged with, but it had a captivating sheen. I wondered if the tools of this age were

even up to the task of cutting down this blade in the first place, though I had no intention of trying it out.

Several dark-brown rings made of a strong-binding metal alloy had been fitted between the golden blade and the shaft to reinforce the connection. Signs such as *Connexio* and *Ligare* had been engraved into them. The shaft extending from the rings was white with a hint of pale yellow. It was made of white oak. The Words adorning it were the same ones I had been using previously with Pale Moon. They controlled the expansion and contraction of matter. The blade was heavier and longer than I was used to, so it did feel different, but I had a good feeling I'd be able to handle it in much the same way as Pale Moon.

Bee the troubadour was ecstatic. "I love this, I love it! I mean, getting to see the legendary Calldawn for myself was great too, but a paladin holding a glaive with a white handle and golden blade?!" Her hands were clenched with excitement and her eyes glittered. "What an image! You make my work too easy!" She darted around the table, gazing at the weapon from all different angles and singing impromptu poems to herself.

"A shaft pure white like lilies, a blade that shone like the morning sun~♪"

The way her unique red hair bobbed about as she moved was humorous in a way I found hard to explain. "Oh! Why don't you try ordering armor and stuff made of silvery metal to go with it?!" she said, growing increasingly excited. "A young paladin in an outfit of pure white and gold? The girls'll go ga-ga over you, I guarantee it!"

"Bee, Bee..." I laughed softly. "Armor isn't for showing off with. And silvery metal armor would be way too much of a hassle to manage and maintain. It *would* stand out, though, which isn't a bad thing."

"Really? I thought you didn't like standing out."

"I do when it's needed. Like when we're outnumbered."

"So the enemies focus their attacks on you?"

"Right, exactly."

I remembered reading at some point in my previous life that a certain famous comic-book superhero deliberately didn't avoid bullets when he was shot at. To

avoid casualties caused by stray bullets, he let them hit the thing that was most resilient: his own body of steel. While I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a superhuman like that, it was part of the job of a frontline warrior to draw the ire of the enemy.

"So you make a big thing of showing *you* are there, and that stirs up the team and discourages the enemy?"

"That depends on who you're facing, but yes, it can have that effect."

Battle gear often comes in colors and shapes that stand out: shields with unsettling eye designs that stare at your opponent, muscle armor that makes you look like a bodybuilder, helmets with enormous ornamentation, and grandiose warpaint. Blood had talked about this kind of thing back when I was a child. He said that most fighting happens between animals and that ideas like "intimidation" and "appearing strong" are pretty important for the same reason animals make their fur stand on end and take the high ground to make themselves look big and strong.

"And if you look cool, that gives you confidence and drive."

True, it can sometimes lead to pride, arrogance, and overconfidence. But on the field of battle where the slightest flinch or hesitation can make the difference between life and death, even bravado and misunderstanding are functional weapons. Pretense is no joke.

"In that sense, this redesign of Calldawn into a glaive feels just right. It's really cool."

"If it's to your liking, Sir Will, I'm sure everyone who worked on it will be happy as well."

Just knowing I was allowed to use it as my personal weapon and I could swing it around as much as I wanted made me almost giddy with excitement. "I'll visit the dwarves soon to thank them directly."

They'd done me an incredible favor by lending an ear to my unreasonable request to redesign their legendary enchanted sword into something practical for actual battle. For this, I could only feel incredibly grateful to Agnarr and everyone in the part of Torch Port known as Dwarftown.

“Oh, and...”

I had another motive for having the sword redesigned.

“Al, as I mentioned before, I’d like to ask you to take care of its former housing.”

“Certainly.”

Calldawn had been entrusted to me by the ghost of the last monarch of the Iron Country, Lord Aurvangr. Just like the crown we had taken back from the beetle-demon Scarabaeus, it was originally royal regalia, a symbol of royal authority among the dwarves of the Iron Country. Though it was a very powerful weapon and I certainly needed it, keeping it all to myself for a long period of time would have been slightly problematic. I had promised to have it returned upon my death, but it wasn’t as if I’d be around to see that followed through, and if I died in some untrodden part of the land, it was possible that the sword would disappear off the face of the earth. So I decided that at the very least, I should split off the blade’s housing, including the hilt and sword guard—these too were a part of the sword, sacred objects made by the fire god—and leave it with Al.

And though I phrased it as “I’m changing it to a glaive suited for battle, so I’d like you to keep hold of the hilt and guard that I don’t need,” Al knew me well enough to understand exactly what I was trying to do.

“I appreciate the consideration.”

After making it through that large battle with the foul-dragon, Al’s stature was now that of a proper warrior, standing tall with a smile on his face. He still had a lot of improving to do in terms of his skills in battle, but those would grow with time. Even now, he was busy gathering his dwarven brothers and making preparations for resurrecting their homeland. In time, Al—Vindalfr—would surely forge a path to the Iron Mountains and revive that underground kingdom. I could believe that now without any doubt.

It was then that a reserved knock came at the door to the hall.

“Come in.”

“Pardon me.”

The door opened, and Anna entered.

Anna had loosely braided flaxen hair and a serious countenance that was a good match for her priest's robes. She was like the glue of Torch Port, acting as a kind of coordinator of the priests involved in the running of the town whom we were borrowing from Bishop Bagley in Whitesails. She was a priest of the god of lightning, Volt, just like Bishop Bagley, and quite a gifted user of benediction. But her greatest skill was that she was a very competent official, performing her work quickly and efficiently. In addition to having a broad knowledge of religious services and ceremonies, she was also familiar with the uncoded rules of common law. Disputes within the farming villages over land, water, and inheritance. Business-related conflicts in Torch Port: late payments, price hikes, production delays, quantity discrepancies, quality issues. Mugging, stealing, fraud, extortion, destruction of property, and other criminal acts. In the name of Volt, Anna handed down appropriate judgments in accordance with written and common law for all these issues. Having someone like her to provide fair trials was as important to the villages as being granted physical protection. And it was in large part thanks to her that I was even able to call myself liege lord of the villages around Beast Woods.

Today, however, she had a dispirited look about her.

"Anna? Is something wrong?"

Her expression was melancholic, and her eyes were downcast. I got the feeling that she wasn't looking as healthy in the face as usual, either.

"Um, I have something to discuss with you all."

"Sure. We're all okay with that, right?"

It was rare to see someone as unflappable as Anna wearing an expression like this. It had to be quite a serious problem. I decided to prepare myself internally. No matter what kind of tremendous problem was put in front of me, I would handle it with composure, not allowing myself to seem the least bit perturbed.

I steeled myself—

"Reystov's been acting... kind of cold recently..."

"What?!"

And reacted to the unexpected subject with spectacular surprise.



Anna and Reystov got on well. That much even I knew.

Anna, an industrious priest and competent official, and Reystov, a skilled adventurer with the title of Penetrator, both held important yet different positions within Torch Port. As the coordinator of the priests, Anna received all the legal disputes and problems reported by the villages and had knowledge of all the latest incidents and information that concerned them. As one of Torch Port's most skilled adventurers, Reystov would use that information to determine where to head out beast-hunting and would also come back with more information on village incidents and problems.

Periodically, Anna would ride circuit around the villages to hold hearings on outstanding issues and offer free medical treatment to those who needed it. On those occasions, Reystov often served as her escort. And protecting her while she was traveling wasn't the only benefit to having someone like Reystov around. Having the presiding priest accompanied by someone in charge of armed force to keep things under control meant that even in the villages there was less chance of someone arguing aggressively for a better verdict. So the two of them came into contact more than you might expect.

Reystov was a person of a slightly different stripe compared to the other roughnecked and irresponsible adventurers. Anna seemed to find him easy to talk to. And to Reystov, a man of few words, Anna, a serious person who wasn't overly averse to silence, appeared to be a person he could feel at ease around. I remembered Bee once saying, "Something's going on with those two! I smell love in the air!" while I naively thought of them as just a couple of good friends. As for the truth...

"No, um, we're not in a relationship."

Seated around a table, we all listened to Anna explain her worries.

"It seems as though Reystov has had something on his mind recently. When I try to talk to him, he often just stays silent, as if he's deep in thought. Even more than usual. I tried doing all kinds of things for him, thinking, 'I may not know what he's worrying about, but if I can support him even a little, that's

something,' and I don't really know what I did wrong, but, um, he scowled at me... Oh, don't get the wrong idea, this has nothing to do with relationships at all."

Anna took a sip of tea. "And since then, it's like he won't look me in the face. Even when we talk about work, he speaks in a cold, quiet tone. And I even get the feeling he's been sort of avoiding me recently... Do you think I've been insensitive to Reystov somehow? He won't tell me anything, but I'm just anxious that I might have done something to make him hate me... Oh, this isn't about a relationship."

Yeah...

"It clearly *is* about a relationship!" Bee shouted bluntly, and I couldn't have agreed with her more.

"N-No, I..." Anna covered her cheeks with her hands and turned bright red.

"Oh come on, what's the big deal? Tell me what you see in him."

"Reystov, that sly old dog..."

Bee and Menel, both quite into this, started to press Anna, and in between protests of "No, it's not like that," she gradually started to reveal her feelings.

At first, she had found him intimidating. Then she noticed that actually, he was always being considerate in one way or another. After he went out fishing and didn't catch anything, he had picked some flowers and presented them to her in the empty wicker basket when he came back, saying they were an offering to the gods. Then there was the way he remembered her favorite things. The softness of the rare smile she glimpsed on his face. How glad she'd felt when he returned safely from slaying the dragon. There was no definite moment; it was a process where she grew closer to him little by little.

All of this was very heartwarming. Yet, as Al and I quietly exchanged glances, the words "What should we do?" were written clearly on his expression, and probably mine as well. Honestly speaking, I was probably the most useless person to ask about anything to do with love. The way the first thing that came to my mind was this kind of solution-seeking thought instead of a sympathetic one really said it all. My life on this earth as Will had so far featured only one

remotely amorous moment: the time the god of undeath confessed to me. Talk about an atypical experience. So coming up with keen insight on matters of love was a little difficult for me.

That being said...

“Umm... I mean... I, I’m not really in love with him or anything like that, but Reystov is very dependable and... a gentleman...”

It wasn’t as if I couldn’t understand where Anna was coming from.

True, Reystov’s appearance was a little wild and rustic, but he definitely didn’t give the impression of someone sleazy. Even the way he behaved carried a strange sense of class. And obviously, when it came to his skills, he was the best of the best. He didn’t speak much and was a little blunt when he did, but he was a man who said what needed to be said, and he had a big heart.

“He has a serious look on his face a lot of the time, but he’s a nice person really.”

“Yes. He is nice. And yes, dependable.”

I agreed completely. Even I thought of him as a real man and a very likeable person. The phrase “heroic figure” was probably created for people like him.

Anna, who had been talking to Bee and Menel, now turned to me. “Um, my lord—no—Will?”

“Yes?”

She changed the way she addressed me. It probably meant that this was a personal matter, and so she wanted to talk not to the Faraway Paladin, governor of Torch Port, but to William, common friend to her and Reystov.

“I might just be overthinking it or imagining things. Or maybe it’s just that I’ve accidentally said something to upset him. But if it seems to you that Reystov has some sort of serious concern on his mind, please, I ask you to help him.”

While looking me straight in the eyes, she spoke not out of a desire to make up with him, nor to discover the reason he was avoiding her, but out of pure, sincere consideration for him. So I returned her earnest look and nodded. “Yes, alright. I will.”

Love was a difficult subject for me, and I doubted that sticking my neck into someone's romantic affairs of all things would achieve anything much. But this was a plea from a friend. How could I shy away from helping with an answer like "It's too hard," "I'm clueless," "I can't do it," or anything like that?

"I'll do the best I can for both of you."

"Will... Thank you."

"Just don't forget to invite me to the wedding!"

"I-It's not like that!"



Once I started paying special attention to Reystov's behavior, one thing became clear to me: something *did* feel off about the way he was acting.

"Currere Oleum!"

At the same time that Reystov's sharp slash cut through a mob of low-rank demons, my magic covered an area of the hall's stone floor in thick grease, hindering the new demons entering the fray. As some slipped and fell on the greased part of the floor and others stopped in their tracks, Reystov unleashed another slash. Extending beyond the blade's actual length due to Signs previously engraved by Gus, it easily cut the immobilized demons apart.

We were in the crumbling monastery in the ravine where we had once fought the chimera. We'd received news from the villages nearby that demons had started hanging out here again, so Reystov and I, both happening to have our hands free, had come to hunt them. The situation inside was once again blasphemous. The twisted, wavering silhouettes of Soldier demons were bathed in light streaming in through tall windows which must have once imparted a sense of sacredness.

But one after another, those demons' vital points were penetrated. Reystov's dirty cloak whipped and whirled. With deft footwork, he moved his well-built body clad in leather armor with astonishing swiftness, maintaining control of the position most advantageous to himself. The magnificence of Gus's magical modifications certainly helped, but even without those, Reystov's skill with a sword was as sharp as ever—no, he was sharper than ever before. He must

have familiarized himself well with his beloved sword's new magical properties and trained up even more. The way he slashed out the instant he perceived an enemy reminded me less of a swordsman and more of a skilled gunslinger in a Western, shooting from the hip.

Several demons let out a gurgling cry as they cast a blessing. Pitch-black, rough-edged claw marks tore through the air. I identified it immediately as a hex and one of the elementary protections granted by Dyrhygma, god of dimensions: the reverse-healing spell Open Wounds. If it made direct contact, it would rip open skin and tear away flesh.

In that short amount of time, I prayed for a miracle. What appeared was a wall of light. Sacred Shield intercepted the black claw marks and dispelled them. Immediately, as if he were attempting to slice the evil god's dispersing blessing in two as well, Reystov unleashed another slash, dispatching another group of Soldier demons. There was never a stop to his movement. His legs flowed. The tip of his sword fluttered and danced, lacerating the throats of a number of winged demons that had attempted to fly at him from behind a pillar. His magic blade passed through the swarming demons with the ease of an experienced seamstress passing a needle through cloth.

I was making myself useful too, of course, and not only by supporting him with magic and blessings. Sometimes swinging my glaive, other times casting support magic, I made sure that things were only getting worse for the demons.

More of them poured out of another passage, screeching in demonjabber. They were probably the first group to organize themselves after the confusion of our surprise attack. Once out of the passage, they raised their swords and shields, formed a line, and advanced towards us with some caution. This formation felt very familiar.

"Shield wall!" Reystov shouted as he jumped aside. "Over to you!"

"Right!"

With the newly modified Calldawn in hand, I stormed the enemy line, charging forward holding the glaive aloft and yelling out a war cry. The demons screamed back in unison and held their shields firm. I swept Calldawn from left to right and slammed it into the wall of shields as hard as I could. I felt my

weapon make powerful contact. The floor creaked underneath my feet. As I completed the swing, the glaive's shaft groaning and bending under the strain, I heard a cacophony of metal, wood, flesh, and bone all breaking at once. I also heard a lot of different objects slamming against the right wall, but I disregarded that and stepped forward. Again I swung the glaive from left to right. The same discordant mixture of sounds rang out again. I heard all kinds of slamming noises coming from the wall to my left.

“Good!”

Once their formation (of a sort) had turned into a complete mess, Reystov charged in and opened the wound further. Of course, I did the same. Standing back-to-back, we protected each other as I swung around the glaive and chopped down demons.

Although it was a barbaric battle best summed up with the words “strategy, shmategy,” there's no need to come up with half-baked plans when you have the strength advantage.

— *Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force.*

Blood had taught me that the stronger side was better off avoiding ill-advised gimmicks and simply throwing their weight behind a frontal attack. And that was exactly what we did. Reystov struck the enemy through with skill, and I expanded the wound with power. The demon mobs turned to dust as if we'd taken a metal file to pie crust.

Reystov's sword skills were on point. There were no flaws in his footwork or swordplay. His judgment was proactive and decisive. His fighting was as impressive as ever. But still, my impression was that something felt off.



I couldn't put into words what exactly wasn't right, but I also knew that in itself didn't disprove what I was feeling. Because Reystov was a swordsman among swordsmen. He had strong arms and legs, neat and uniformly trimmed nails, and a well cared for sword, always in good condition and held in a sheath modified to be easy to draw. He had full awareness of every part of himself and, for the sake of his sword, he kept good control of all of it.

He would never allow there to be anything so blatantly off about him that I could point out exactly what it was. And yet there was still a slight sense of wrongness about the way he was fighting. That in *itself* was strange.

After exterminating the demon horde in the crumbling monastery, we went around mopping up a few remaining enemies and collecting dust and other things as proof of the hunt. As we were doing this, I asked him the question. “Reystov, um, has something happened?”

“Like what?” Reystov’s posture as he replied looked no different to usual, but I didn’t miss the slight wrinkle that formed on his forehead. After all, I had sworn to live this life the right way. Avoiding interactions with people, shutting out everything, and reaching a dead end—those were the mistakes of my previous life. I had no intention of repeating them.

“Something feels strange about the way you’re acting.”

“You noticed, huh...”

“Only vaguely. You’re not the kind of person to fail to report being out of form, so it can’t be that you’re not feeling well, right?”

He grunted and nodded slowly, then fell silent for a while as if choosing his words. “I’m aware I’m... rushing things a bit.”

I nodded, realizing that was it. Whereas I was generally very direct in how I did things, the clever thing about Reystov was that he had a bit of a tricky side. Even when it came to a brute force assault like this one, he would usually throw his opponents a curveball or two when he knew a miss wouldn’t hurt. There had been none of that this time.

“Something’s preying on my mind.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

He remained silent for a moment, then shook his head. “No.” His tone may have been gentle, but it was an unequivocal refusal. “Sorry.”

“Not at all.”

For Reystov to say that had to mean that there really was nothing I could do at this point in time. It wasn’t as if I could solve every worry in the world.

Reystov was an incredibly skilled warrior with a well-rounded character. If he wouldn't talk about it, then that meant he didn't need or want help. Sticking my nose in anyway would make me the definition of a busybody.

"If there's anything I can do to help, please tell me anytime." The only thing I could really say to him was that I was on his side. "I think of you as my brother-in-arms, and I deeply respect you." I made eye contact with him as I spoke. "I'd like to support you. So please, if you ever need my help, give me a shout."

"Sure."

Reystov did nod, but his expression looked somehow clouded. I got the unsettling feeling that something bad was coming. A couple of weeks later, it turned out I was right.



The sight I witnessed that day caused my body to freeze up and only the quietest of sounds to leave my throat.

"No! Don't die! No... no! Reystov, *Reystov*!"

Anna's screams pierced the air, which was already thick with the stench of blood and the sounds of feet and shrieking, desperate voices. I rushed into the hall. At the center of the commotion was Reystov, laid out flat on the floor on a mat of straw. He was gritting his teeth and wheezing, his face pale.

But what shocked me more than all of that was his right hand, which had swelled up and turned purple.

If it hadn't been on the end of his arm, I might not even have recognized it as a human hand. It was blown up like a rubber ball. Were those strange protrusions sticking out of it *fingers*? Really? Was that really the strong, calloused, and scarred hand of Reystov, the man who had only gone beast hunting with Menel just a few days ago—

"Will!"

A familiar voice broke me out of my state of shock.

"Menel! What is... How did—"

"It's a demon bite!" Menel called out as he came rushing up to me, pushing

aside the crowd that had gathered to see what was going on. “One of those left over from the Rust Mountains, best guess is a General!”

“A General?!”

According to Menel’s hurried and simplified explanation, the two of them had headed to a group of Union Age ruins to hunt beasts when they happened along a group of demons led by a General that looked like a mix between a person and a winged insect. The group of demons was so large that even Menel hesitated about whether they should engage them or retreat. Reystov argued that they should engage and gave several good reasons. For instance, the two of them still hadn’t been noticed. If they chose their timing well and attacked enemies in the right order, there was a good chance that they could kill the leader and pull out after that.

Menel thought for a moment and agreed with him. Reystov moved in, supported by Menel’s archery and elementalist skills. And though they did encounter some resistance, they succeeded in striking through the demon leader’s throat. However...

“That feckin’ bug, even though he’d had his arms and legs chopped off and his throat cut out, he somehow came down the blade to the hilt and bit Reystov’s hand.”

Demons ranked General were horrendously tough. Reystov had been well aware of that. He immediately kicked the demon’s body off him and hunted down the remaining enemies.

“But after we’d gotten to safety, Reystov complained that his right hand felt like it was burning. That was when it started changing color and swelling up.”

Menel immediately administered several herbs he always carried with him and also incanted an elementalist healing spell that worked using the spirits of life dwelling in the human body. However, neither cure had much effect. From this, he determined that it was probably either a powerful poison or a curse. To slow the spread if it was a poison, he restricted the flow of blood by wrapping a cloth tightly around the arm. Then he took the shortest route to Torch Port through a fairy trail, carried Reystov to my mansion, and laid him down in the hall. Unfortunately, he found me absent because I was out at the port, so he ran

around calling people and quickly got hold of Anna, whom he asked to heal Reystov. However...

“It won’t heal!” she cried out. “His other wounds are gone, but his right hand just—I’ve tried everything! Cure Poison, Cure Disease, Remove Curse...” Paying no mind to her disheveled hair and the fact that her clothes were stained with Reystov’s blood, Anna reported the situation to me in tears.

I was shocked by what I heard. Anna didn’t have any battle experience, but she was a priest bestowed with high-level blessings by the god of lightning, Volt. She could clear up even quite strong, troublesome poisons and curses with just a few minutes of prayer. And yet...

“The blessings have no effect at all?”

“There is some amount of improvement, but then it turns right back to this again! I’ve just been doing that over and over and—”

“It’s agony for him every time. But we can’t just leave it, or the hand’s gonna die. Then if the purple spreads, it’ll go from his arm to his shoulder, then next’ll be his head and heart. This is serious, brother.”

“M-My prayers aren’t enough. That has to be it. Will—”

“I understand.”

I crouched down beside Reystov and reached over to his disfigured right hand.

“Ggnnhhh...!”

The slightest touch caused him to groan in agony as if a branding iron had been held against his skin. Feeling impressed at the level of fortitude Reystov was showing in gritting his teeth and bearing the pain instead of writhing or turning violent, I closed my eyes and recited a verse of prayer. “Gracefeel, god of the flame. Shine the light of healthy souls on evil wounds, evil curses, and evil diseases alike, and rid us of their shadows.”

This blessing was a very high-level one. It would take more than an instant to invoke.

I focused strongly on my connection with my guardian deity, the god of the

flame. I imagined God's helping hand, offered from her holy seat outside this material world, connecting to Reystov through me, and prayed with single mind for him to be saved. As I prayed, I had the constant, exhausting feeling that something was being drained out of me. It felt as though I was acting as a conductor, and something hot and blindingly bright was flowing through me into Reystov. In a state of extreme concentration, I got the feeling that I heard everyone around me draw a collective breath.

This was the prayer of Full Recovery. There were multiple blessings for fighting against all imaginable kinds of diseases, poisons, and hexes, but this miracle stood at the very top. No matter what kind of poison, disease, or hex it was, no matter what kind of ill will inflicted it, this miracle would brush it aside, even resolving peculiar kinds of symptoms like petrification and bodily deformation. Among the many miracles my god had granted me, this blessing was the most powerful and effective, at least in regard to poisons and curses.

Once the miracle had taken full effect, the discoloration and swelling in Reystov's right hand began to fade, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief...

"Wh—?! No..."

But the effect was short-lived. Not half a minute later, the color and swelling started to return. Reystov groaned in intense pain, his body convulsing so violently that if I didn't know better, I might have thought it was a joke.

"Reystov! Reystov! Stay with me! You're going to be all right!" Her voice full of anguish, Anna desperately tried to support him.

"Fecking hell... What has it *done* to him?!" Menel had probably been expecting that things would work out once I prayed. He had been relatively calm until this point. This was the first moment that cracks in his composure were starting to show, and I wasn't exactly calm, either. What on earth was this?! I racked my brain for ideas.

"I can think of... one thing it might be..."

The first thing that came to mind was a powerful hex that my prayers had no effect on. The demons used wicked prayers to the god of dimensions and powerful magic linked to hexes. I had been granted a great deal of protection by the god of the flame, but even so, it was conceivable that a General with

greater specialization in prayers and magic could surpass it.

“But I don’t think that’s it.”

Something about that didn’t feel right to me. Normally, if you used a blessing to cure poisoning or remove a curse, it either worked or it didn’t. I’d never known a blessing to half-work, only for the symptoms to immediately return, nor had I ever heard of such a thing from Gus, Mary, or even Bishop Bagley.

The strange way my blessings were responding to these symptoms had to be some kind of hint. What was needed was probably a blessing or piece of magic dealing with *something* that was neither a poison nor a disease nor a curse.

Gus had told me a long time ago that there was a twin to most magics and miracles. Just as there was the Word *Lumen*, so was there the Word *Tenebrae*. Just as the followers of the good gods used the miracle of Close Wounds, the followers of the evil gods used its inverse, the miracle of Open Wounds. Even an ultimate magic of destruction like the Word of Entity Obliteration could be overturned by the ultimate miracle of rebirth, the prayer of Resurrection, were it to be used at its fullest potential. It is in the dark that there is light, and in silence the word, and in death life, and vice versa for each. Assuming the problem wasn’t simply a lack of power, even these mysterious symptoms of Reystov’s had to have some kind of technique that would be effective against them. But I didn’t know what.

Panic started to set in. If I didn’t do something soon, Reystov would—

“Off...”

With his blood-drained lips trembling, his eyes still unfocused, and his voice hoarse, Reystov tried to say something. Anna brought an ear to his mouth, tried to make out his words...

“My arm... *Cut it off!*”

...and looked at him aghast.



It was a gruesome suggestion.

“Reystov, you can’t!” I was instantly opposed. “Yes, with a high-level blessing,

I can regenerate large body parts like lost limbs! But after something like that, it'll never be completely like it was! If you damage the sensation in your right hand..."

He would probably be able to manage day to day. But his hand would feel different, as though it belonged to someone else. He wouldn't be able to make fine movements. And that—that would be the death of Reystov as a swordsman, Reystov who had given so much for his sword.

"If it's... that or... dying..."

"But—"

"My fight did this..." He groaned in pain again. "I'll live with it, cut it off!"

"No! Think straight, there has to be some other way... Menel, call the other priests! They might know something!"

"On it!" Menel dashed off. In that short amount of time, the discoloration and swelling had spread halfway up Reystov's forearm. Something, there had to be something. Growing restless, I scoured my memory, trying to remember all the methods I knew.

He probably figured there was no point in repeating himself. With bloodshot eyes and clenched teeth, Reystov took a look at the people around him and said, "Anna, cut it off for me... please."

"Wh—" For a moment, my mind went blank in shock.

How could he... How could he ask something so cruel of her...?

That was my natural first thought. However, the moment it crossed my mind...

"Alright. I'll prepare a dagger and something for you to bite down on. Please don't bite your tongue." Her face was pale and she was trembling, but Anna looked Reystov straight in the eyes as she spoke.

Looking at her, I realized something. Although Reystov's suggestion was very cruel, at the same time, it was proof that he had the greatest possible trust in her, enough to trust her with destroying his use of a sword, his own right hand. Anna understood that—and she was on the verge of carrying it out.

She drew a dagger and prayed for a few moments to Volt, the god with the sword of lightning. A lot of faith was placed in Volt as the leader of the gods, and so he possessed innumerable blessings, including blessings of the sword to increase the sharpness of a worshipper's blade and blessings of non-lethality to prevent the enemy from succumbing to the wounds inflicted upon them. Even on a practical level, Anna was a better choice for this than an ordinary swordsman.

"Over to you." Immediately before Anna put a rolled-up cloth in his mouth for him to bite, Reystov, his face pallid, left Anna with words that entrusted everything to her. He never said "I'm sorry."

Anna nodded back. "You're in good hands," she replied, smiling through the tears spilling down her cheeks. "I'll do it cleanly, I promise." As Reystov lay on his back, she knelt down, pressed her left knee into his right shoulder, and turned to the others around her. "Hold Reystov down, everyone."

She gripped the dagger in one hand, while her other rested on the handle. From that position, she was probably going to press it down with all her weight, cutting his arm off at the elbow joint. Reystov's eyes were wide open and fixed on the dagger. In a few seconds, in just a few more seconds, Anna would cut off Reystov's right arm. Severing the arm of the person you have feelings for—that would probably become proof of the bond between them.

But I didn't want things to end that way!

As I clenched my own jaw and tears brimmed in my eyes, I desperately searched for an answer. What was it? What on earth were these symptoms? They weren't poison or disease or a hex. Blessings had no effect at all. He had been bitten by a demon, a General that looked like a mix between a person and a winged insect.

An insect?

Like a bolt of lightning, inspiration struck. My body moved quicker than I ever thought possible. I grabbed Anna's arm, which was being brought down at that very instant, snatched the dagger from her, slashed open Reystov's swollen right hand...

"Eliminare vermes, eliminare insecta!"

...and I shouted the Word of Worm-warding.



Anna cried. She clung to Reystov and bawled her eyes out. Reystov held her gently in his arms and patted her softly on the back with his right hand again and again. As I looked at them, there was a palpable sense of relief not just from me but from everyone there.

“Respect, seriously. I’d never have figured that one out.” Menel, who had come back with a few priests, slapped me on the shoulder. I’d had him running around for nothing in the end.

“I was really lucky. It was a close call.”

The true culprit behind the mysterious symptoms was a parasite. The General-ranked demon in question was like a cross between an insect and a human, and its mouth had harbored fiercely poisonous parasitic eggs, which it delivered into Reystov’s body at the moment it bit him. Once the bugs hatched from their eggs, they started eating him from the inside and spreading their poison everywhere. The physical wound and the poison could be reduced with blessings. However, benedictions to the gods for merciful healing would never take the lives of bugs who were just living there. That was why, even though the symptoms could be momentarily relieved, they could not be completely cured.

Immediately after I hit him with the Word of Worm-warding, all kinds of grotesque parasites poured out of the incision on Reystov’s hand. I had the feeling I’d be seeing them again in my nightmares. But, regardless, I used Words to bind them all down, not letting a single one escape, and burned them to death. Then I recast the healing and anti-poison blessings. This time, the swelling and discoloration in Reystov’s right hand didn’t come back. But if I’d been the slightest bit slower, if I’d taken just slightly longer to realize, Anna would have ended up completely severing Reystov’s right hand. The bugs had only spread as far as his wrist, so that would still probably have saved his life. However, his right hand would never have gone back to normal.

Healing using benediction was extremely powerful. It could easily perform the kinds of miracles that even the medical field of my past world couldn’t accomplish. And today’s events had taught me a serious lesson about becoming

over-reliant on it.

An invasion of parasites—what an unexpected way to get around benediction. How many others could I think of? Healing-type blessings wouldn't take effect if the patient refused them, so one way would be to give someone poison by lying and saying that it's medicine, then making them believe that the symptoms of the poison are just the medicine's side effects. Or, if you triggered a trap and got stuck in a situation where one of your limbs was crushed by a massive, heavy object and you couldn't pull it out, healing the limb with a blessing would be meaningless. Hitting an opponent with a mix of quick-acting diseases and curses during a battle where there wouldn't be time to calmly pray would probably also work. Once I started thinking with a malicious mindset, I realized there were many ways to work around blessings. Even the healing provided by genuine miracles of the gods wasn't totally infallible in the hands of human beings.

“Wait, what?”

I suddenly wondered about something. Parasites couldn't be killed, but illnesses could be cured—did that mean that my god didn't view bacteria as living creatures and killed them freely? Bacteria aside, viruses and so on were treated as being on the border between living and non-living things even in my previous world, so maybe that wasn't so unlikely. Come to think of it, though, this world didn't have microscopes. I didn't actually know whether diseases here resulted from bacteria and viruses in the first place. It seemed to be a fact that there was a connection between lack of hygiene and disease, but that didn't necessarily mean that the principle underlying disease was exactly the same as my previous world. Maybe diseases here were caused by an elemental imbalance within the body. This world did have pretty mystical things living in it, and miasma and stuff existed, too...

“Well, I guess it doesn't really matter.”

I decided to end that thought there. Thinking too much was a bad habit of mine. The priority for now was supposed to be getting everyone settled down again, and also, I felt that we ought to be considerate enough to let Reystov and Anna have some time alone if possible. It seemed right.



It was a quiet night. The light of the moon shone awfully bright in the icy air of winter. Holding a lantern containing magical light, I walked down a street devoid of people. Before long, I arrived at a certain area of the river port. As I looked around, I saw the light of one other lantern besides mine.

“You came,” he said.

“Yeah.”

A few days after the stir of almost cutting off Reystov’s right hand, he called me out to the port’s cargo handling area. The cargo handling area was a large space used to organize, sort, and temporarily store the cargo being loaded and unloaded from the boats at the port. It had an open-air storage yard and some open, roofed sheds. However, it wasn’t the busy season for the port right now, and also it was night time, so the cargo was sparse. Over at the sheds I could still make out the shapes of large water pots and wooden crates of some kind, but about the only pieces of cargo in the storage yard were two bundled stacks of lumber. The only other things I could see were at my feet: cobblestone paving of an older age and half-buried by earth, and dry grass swaying in the night-time breeze.

Amid that lonely scenery, sitting on one of the stacks of wood, was Reystov. I recognized the messy hair, the beard, his unwavering, piercing eyes. I recognized his well-kept sword, his thick cloak, frayed around the hem, dirty with grass stains and animal blood, and by his feet, the sturdy, soot-stained lantern that showed plenty of signs of wear. It was Reystov just as I knew him. But somehow, he was different. He had an unusually soft atmosphere about him.

“How has your right hand been?”

“Normal. You saved my skin. I thank you.”

“You’ve helped me just as much.”

As I walked up to him, Reystov gestured beside him. I set down my lantern and sat. For a while, we gazed in silence at the light from the two lanterns, one of fire, one of magic. I lost track of how long we sat like that.

“I think I... couldn’t make up my mind.” Breaking the silence, Reystov spoke in a quiet voice. “I’m from a settlement of one of the Ice Mountains called Volt’s Stove. William, do you know the Ice Mountains?”

I nodded. I had heard stories from my grandfather Gus and the troubadour Bee.

A large mountain belt ran east and west across the continent of Grassland to the north, dividing it in two. It was called the Stairway to Heaven. Peak after peak of steep mountains rising tall into the sky, each one a nightmare of sheer cliffs of rock, this mountain belt was a natural barrier that divided the temperate plains of the south from the tundras of the far north, where giants and ogres who followed the evil gods waged unending war. The Ice Mountains were one of the mountain ranges belonging to the Stairway to Heaven and was also the most well known around the Fertile Kingdom.

Despite their fame, the Ice Mountains weren’t especially steep. The slopes were actually quite gentle, there were basins in places, and the climate was reasonably mild. Although it was still an unforgiving place, there were many areas where people could live, and there also existed records of adventurers who had set foot on the peaks by traversing the ridges in the height of summer. The Ice Mountains could be *climbed*—they were the ones with routes that made it just about possible for living creatures to cross.

Therefore, the ogres and giants who lived in the northern regions sometimes attempted to invade the south by crossing the Ice Mountains. They were often spontaneous small-scale attacks, but sometimes they were organized offensives led by heroes blessed with strong protection from the evil gods. The southward marches of the forces of evil had sometimes even made an impact on the history of Grassland. But it wasn’t very often that the giants and goblins from the north managed to spill into the southern plains. Because those mountains were where *they* lived.

“The northern protectors. The warriors of the cutting wind who serve blood and steel. The ferocious Silverpeak Clan.”

“You can say ‘those backward northern savages,’ you know.”

I chose the most flattering terms I knew, and Reystov undid all my effort in an

instant with a single smirk.

“N-No, I wouldn’t... But yes, I can believe that.”

“I looked that much of a savage, did I?” he quipped, still smirking.

“I’m talking about your sword skills!” I laughed back. Reystov was pretty talkative today.

The Ice Mountains were home to the Silverpeak Clan. The various books and rumors described them as a barbarous and hardy clan of warriors that acted as the continent’s northern shield, engaged in constant war against the giants and ogres of the north. Partly due to the cold weather, both the men and women of the clan were large-bodied for the most part. They had a lot of hair, the men had thick beards, and they all preferred to wear thick clothing and fur.

Because they often had occasion to fight large enemies like ogres and giants, the way they fought with a sword was extremely aggressive. When fighting such huge opponents, defense means very little. They looked down upon defense and cheap tricks like feints, and sought only deadly blows, as powerful and sharp as possible. This was a clan that since long ago, before even the Union Age, had been producing figures like Nanok Nylav the Great, king of soldiers, who had climbed from the gutter to the throne using nothing but a single sword.

“Reystov, your impressive sword skills are a trait of the north, right?”

“Yeah. I learned from my father when I was a brat.”

He definitely embodied the sword skills of the north I’d heard so much about.

“This sword is also a family heirloom forged by my elders.”

The Silverpeak Clan were also well known as swordsmiths. Their smithing style was called Northern-style. It was said that they fanned the flames of their fires using the icy winds blowing through the valley and quenched the steel of their blades after heating and hammering by sticking them into the snow. The swords they made were known for having the cold, crystal clarity of ice and a robust, practical construction that rivalled the work of dwarves.

However...

“If you know the praise my clan gets, you also know the criticism.”

“Yes...”

I wasn't sure whether it was their location or their traditions that was to blame, but I had heard that within their society, a good warrior was considered to be someone who was violent, ambitious, decisive, and valued neither possessions nor even their own life. They would sometimes risk their lives in tests of courage, and there would be no remorse if someone died as a result. Their greatest pleasure was to defeat their enemies, take their lives, and claim their treasures. It was also said that because of these traditions, people of the Silverpeak Clan were short-tempered and tended to be controlling and arrogant towards others. Many among them were said to be hot-blooded people with wild tempers, whose emotions could swing violently between love and hate.



“It's a savage place,” Reystov muttered quietly. “Worse than you're imagining, probably. They might show a little unity when they're up against those damn ogres, but the Silverpeak Clan isn't a single unified community. It's several groups in a never-ending fight over each other's hunting spots and tiny patches of arable land.”

He told me that his homeland was a world of plotting, war, pillaging, blood washing away blood in the name of retaliation—and then, when the opportunity seemed to present itself, reconciliation parties, sometimes marriages between groups to reduce the hostility, while more plots were made in secret. When the servants of the evil gods attacked from the north, a temporary truce would be struck, and they would be united. And once the war was over, those brothers-in-arms would turn on each other again.

“Volt's Stove was one of the settlements in those mountains. In a basin, like the peak of a low mountain turned in on itself. The story goes that in the time of the gods, the lightning god Volt dug out a mountain and made a stove to feed the army he was leading against Illtreat, god of tyranny. On the fire, he placed a mystical pot given to him by his wife, Mater the Earth-Mother, from which an endless supply of food could spring forth. And after camping for the night, all his countless soldiers were full and satisfied.”

It was a fascinating story. I wondered if it was a Caldera basin made by the eruption of an old volcano or something. Of course, in this world, there was a chance that it actually was the aftermath of the god of lightning's cooking. In any case, if Volt's Stove carried a legend like that, didn't that mean...

"You guess right. The Ice Mountains don't have much farmable land, but Volt's Stove is one of the good spots. I was born as the second son of the chief of that village. I had a wise grandmother and a father who was a magnificent warrior. My mother was a straight-talker with a hearty laugh. My brother was cheerful and a joker, and I got a younger sister later, too. I guess I had a happy childhood, as things go."

A cold breeze stirred. Southmark's winters were nippy, but I was certain that the wind in Reystov's homeland had a much nastier bite.

"I was ten. A group of nearby tribes, led by one in particular, invited ours to a feast. But they were all in collusion. The main warriors of our tribe, my father among them, fell victim to a surprise attack. Then the attackers poured in. They couldn't fight them all off. My tribe was destroyed. My grandmother, my mother, my brother, my little sister—all of them died. And what game the gods were playing that day I don't know, but I was away with my uncle on my mother's side. I escaped harm and survived."

After a pause, during which neither of us spoke, he continued. "My uncle and cousins took me in and treated me well. Of course, I devoted myself to training, dreaming of the day I'd kill that other tribe for what they'd done. But they prospered now that they had Vault's Stove. I came to the realization that just because someone's evil enough to stab your parents in the back, it doesn't necessarily mean they don't know how to rule."

By the time Reystov became an adult of fifteen, the tribe responsible had grown even larger and was fast taking over the surrounding tribes. And so, realizing that he would only cause trouble for his uncle's tribe and village, where he was staying...

"I decided to give up my quest for revenge." Reystov spoke in a flat tone, as if this had all happened too long ago. I couldn't read any emotion from it. What kinds of feelings was he hiding behind that dry tone? "Instead, I decided to

make a name for myself. The forebears of our tribe made their names with swords in hand, and gained honor and glory that will stand forever. If I could repeat that feat—take up my sword and find honor and glory, spread my name so far and wide that it would reach the ears of my family in the pleasant fields of heaven—then their souls would be proud and they could be at peace.”

In the light of the lanterns, he told me the story of the birth of an adventurer. He made an oath to the god of lightning, Volt, swearing to pay his respects to his family by offering them honor and glory. He descended the mountain with a merchant. He was taken aback by the plenty of the world below and how much activity there was. He got into a few quarrels and fights, and gained definite confidence in his own sword skills.

With a faint smile, he told me about the times when things hadn’t gone so well, episodes of failure and disgrace. And he talked about his allies: the times when he found others to join him, the times they went their separate ways, and the times they were sadly lost forever.

“All in all, the life of a wanderer and an adventurer probably just suited my personality.”

He made a name for himself killing many monsters and conquering several ruins. Before he knew it, he had earned the second name of “the Penetrator,” and troubadours began to sing about him.

“And then I met you, and my list of exploits grew longer,” Reystov said while allowing his gaze to drift up to the starry sky, “and finally, I became one of the illustrious Dragon-slayers.”



“Of course, I’m not brazen enough to claim credit for things I didn’t do.” Our private conversation held on a winter’s night continued without much emotion. “If anyone asked who the key player in the slaying of the dragon was, William, that’d be you. That radiant flash as you struck at Valacirca’s throat—it was enchanting.”

As usual, I couldn’t pick up on how Reystov was feeling. I remained silent, not knowing how to respond.

He continued, “But it’s not as if I played no part at all, right?”

That question, I knew how to respond to. “Of course. That’s as clear as day.” Like Reystov, I had no intention of claiming credit that wasn’t mine to claim. “You cut heads off the hydra, stabbed demons to death, and opened the way to the throne at the heart of the mountain. Together with Ghelreis, you repelled the demons surrounding the throne. You kept Valacirca in check several times and tore off his scales. If anyone ever criticizes you and says you did nothing, on the god of the flame and my soul as a warrior, I will personally challenge that person to a duel.”

Menel, Al, Ghelreis, and Reystov had all fought the foul-dragon alongside me. We had overcome him together, and had any one of us been missing, we would never have won.

But for him to bring this up, did it mean that...

“Is that what you’ve been...”

Reystov huffed a half-laugh. “No. I’ve got thicker skin than that. It’s just... it put the thought in my mind.” I wasn’t sure if it was just the light from the lanterns, but there seemed to be a darkness behind his put-on smile.

“What thought?”

“Well—” He paused. “That... this might be the time to pack it in.”

The warrior who had earned the name of Reystov the Penetrator and without doubt won honor and glory spoke softly. “I wasn’t the main force in the slaying of the dragon, but I earned recognition as one of the party and I played my part well. Soon, this accomplishment will be put into song and spread to countless people across countless lands, handed down through countless generations. And I’m certain that my tribe and my family, who rest with the gods now, will have found both pride and peace after seeing the scales I cut from the dragon. So...”

His quiet muttering sounded like he was confessing his sins.

“...wouldn’t it be all right for me to lay down my sword now? Is what I started to think.”

My instinctive thought was, *Isn't that only natural?* For a long time, Reystov had been strict with himself, and now all of his training had produced definite results. What on earth could be wrong with wanting to close the book on it now? But Reystov went quiet again. Hesitating, he opened and then closed his mouth several times without saying anything. Then, finally, he spoke, as if throwing up the thing that had been festering inside him. "I felt weakness in myself."

"Reystov, aren't you being a bit hard on yourself?"

"Then what if it were you, William?"

"Huh...?"

"Imagine that after you made it through a grueling holy battle for your god, the thought occurred to you that maybe that was *enough* devotion to the god of the flame."

I was aghast at the thought.

"What if that thought wormed its way into your head and kept coming back to you and you couldn't easily shake it off. What would you do?"

I'd never even imagined it. I was stuck for words.

"Technically, I've sworn an oath to the lightning god Volt, but I'm not a deeply devout person. I placed my faith in the steel in my hands and the body and spirit I forged on my own. My sword was God to me. I devoted myself to God, I spent my life with God, and I thought I would die with God."

"Is that why—"

"Yes, that's why I continued to seek battle."

In his moment of uncertainty, he had stepped forward. In his moment of uncertainty, he had tried to force himself to carry on as normal. It was the kind of stubbornly direct choice that warriors were known for. I now understood that this was probably also the reason he had been avoiding Anna.

"And that's how that ended up happening to my hand, and you, Meneldor, and... Anna had to look after me."

"You can't blame yourself for that." Claiming the head of a General leading a

mob of demons was no easy feat. That alone was an accomplishment worthy of being sung about by troubadours for generations.

“Yeah, I know. But after that incident—” He paused. “I didn’t want Anna to ever have to cry like that again.”

I might have accidentally stared at him. I couldn’t believe that someone rough like Reystov, who always spoke in a stubbornly composed tone, was talking about another person so fondly. “You love her,” I said.

“Yeah, I probably do. But at the same time, part of me can’t imagine putting away my sword, can’t believe I’m letting a damn woman give me second thoughts.”

That probably summed it up. If he could sort out his feelings so easily, he wouldn’t be having a problem. I knew well the intensity of the passion Reystov had poured into his sword.

“Which is why I want my sword to answer this question.” Reystov stood from the block of lumber. Following his lead, I stood as well. I’d been able to sense the crackling tension in the air for a while now. It was Reystov’s inner determination, his fight.

“William. William G. Maryblood. Paladin, Dragon-slayer, warrior with the power of an ancient dragon. My brother-in-arms.”

An overpowering sense of intimidation crashed into me like a wave of pressure. I almost took a step back, but I stood firm and met his glare head-on.

“I challenge you to a duel.”



As the cold wind blew across the storage yard, we stood facing each other. The distance between us was a blade and a step. Either of us could cut the other by simply drawing our sword and taking a single step forward. It was the kind of distance that set the nerves on edge. We were deadly close.

“How will we determine the winner?” I asked.

“Whoever sheds blood first loses. If you’re beyond my reach here and now, I’ll lay down my sword.”

“And if you win?”

“If my sword tells me to carry on, I’ll just pick up where I left off, on the path to honor and glory.”

“Leaving Anna behind?”

“Yeah. I realize this has nothing to do with you and you’d probably prefer to stay out of it.”

“Not at all. I’m cheering for Anna pretty hard, actually.” I kept my body tense, but I relaxed my face a little and smiled. “I feel pretty motivated.”

“Thanks. That helps.”

“Still...”

As things stood, I was already at a *horrible* disadvantage.

Even given that it was night time, Torch Port wasn’t such a dangerous place right now that I had to walk everywhere in full armor. I’d only been going out to talk with one of my friends, so I had no reason at all to head out fully equipped. At this moment, I was wearing nothing more than extremely ordinary everyday clothes and a coat. I had neither Overeater nor Calldawn by my hip, only the single steel sword I carried when I didn’t need anything more. Reystov, in comparison, looked to have the sword he always used for actual battles at his side, and under his thick cloak I could see he was wearing leather armor and other gear, like greaves and hand protectors. Not only did I have the worse weapon, the places where I could deliver an effective strike would be considerably restricted.

Also, because we’d been talking for so long in the middle of the night in winter, I was cold. I’d become more tolerant to low temperatures since gaining the power of a dragon, but I’d promised myself to suppress that power and stay as human as possible most of the time. So when it was freezing cold out, I was freezing, too. It goes without saying that being freezing hinders your movement. In particular, the fact that my hands were numb was bad. Really bad. Reystov, on the other hand, if my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me earlier, had stashed a warming stone in the folds of his cloak and been using it to warm his hands up. I hadn’t thought anything of it at the time. There was nothing

particularly strange about carrying around something to keep you warm in this cold weather. But now I realized that even that had been part of the plan.

And, of course, because we'd been talking, I was within what I called "swordsman's range." I couldn't imagine that Reystov would allow me to back away and try the strategy of defeating him with magic and stones from a distance. He would cut me to ribbons well before I managed to get a safe distance away. And last but not least, I'd come to a place of Reystov's choosing. It wouldn't be at all surprising if he'd set up little traps by digging holes or tying grass into snares. At the very least, that was one extra thing I now had to pay attention to.

"Let's be honest, this is pretty unfair, isn't it?"

"I don't remember saying I'd fight fair. If I'm going up against you, this much preparation is just good sense."

"Oh, come on. Is this a duel or a street fight? Good God," I said, acting slightly indignant. "But I'm glad to see you acting more like your normal self."

As I said it, I saw a closed-lip grin form on his unshaven face. This aspect of him was what made him so good, and I had a lot of respect for it. He would ensure he had full control of the situation before pushing through the victory with fully honed sword skills. It was crafty and yet somehow straightforward, and he straddled those two extremes masterfully.

"Do you accept? Or refuse?"

"Yes. I acce—" The slash was instantaneous.



With the dull sound of metal scraping against metal, the blade grazed by my wide-open chest. I'd *known* he would strike out at me the moment I accepted his challenge. And because I knew it, I began to draw my sword half an instant ahead of when I said it. I moved first. I was certain of it.

"How..."

How did he manage to get his blade to me faster when I had a head start?! I'd just barely managed to slide my sword into the path of his and divert it, but if

I'd been a moment slower, I would have been both bleeding and defeated.

The movement of pulling back the scabbard, his hip rotation, his legwork—every action involved with drawing that sword was exceedingly quick and had no wasted movement. I hadn't even blinked, yet his ready stance had turned instantly into the tip of a blade heading towards me as though I were watching a film with several frames missing partway through. The first attack was lightning-quick. I was convinced that even a pretty skilled warrior would have had their chest torn open at that moment nine times out of ten. But surviving that absurd first attack was only where the real battle started.

The ground shuddered as Reystov stepped towards me, his entire face overtaken by a demonic expression. The first slash from the scabbard was followed up immediately by a two-handed slash back in the opposite direction. Roaring filled the air as a furious series of strikes followed, reminding me of one of Blood's all-out attacks, except that Reystov's sword was much shorter and the attacks came much faster. Throat, shoulder, wrist, chest, side—each attack thrown at me was precise and unforgiving and overflowed with power. If I succumbed to the pressure and stepped back, I'd eventually be hunted down. Ordinary ducking and dodging was doomed to fail.

So, shouting loudly, I *stopped it by force*. There was a violent crash of metal, and my sword chipped.

Reystov's sword was a noted Northern-style weapon, and Gus had engraved Signs into it. Hitting a garden-variety sword against it, it was inevitable that my weapon was going to get bashed around and end up chipped. I couldn't hope to win against Reystov while being precious about my sword. Even though the fight was to be over at the first sign of blood, this was a serious battle, a duel—not a play fight—using real swords. Either of us could die if we were stabbed in the wrong place. I didn't have the luxury of fighting pretty and taking care of my sword.

So, resigning myself to having my sword destroyed by the end of the battle, I clashed blades on purpose. I slammed everything I had against him, including his own weapon, and he did the same. The powerful impacts shook our swords and stung the hands gripping them. Reystov tottered.

It was true that the speed, technique, and chains of attacks Reystov was capable of were formidable, but he was only using a single sword. If I met the sword that was his only method of attack head-on, smashing it and smashing it with enough force to hit him with his own weapon, at least then I wouldn't get sucked into that whirlwind of attacks and torn to shreds.



If the back-and-forth of attack and defense was starting to get out of hand, I just needed to crush those moves with overwhelming power. After all, Blood had taught me that if you got ripped, you could solve pretty much everything by force.

“*Goddamn* you’re strong...!”

However, Reystov’s sword was attempting to surpass the limits that “pretty much everything” implied. He had probably predicted that I would try to use brute force to break through this situation. As our blades continued to crash against each other, suddenly, Reystov made a move. At the moment of contact, his sword took a large swerve. Using the momentum of my heavy attacks against me, the tip of the blade closed in on my chest. I diverted its path, the tip just barely missing. I slammed my feet into the ground to keep my footing. Our shoulders collided. He pivoted, trying to control space to his advantage.

But that was a bad position for clashing swords. I closed the distance. Our blades locked. Immediately, Reystov’s sword turned. Not good. My thumb, I was going to lose it. Letting out a yelp of alarm, I blocked with the hilt and knocked him away. We crossed swords again, metal slid against metal, and the next moment, I had no idea what he’d done, but the butt of his weapon was in front of my eyes. He was go—

There was a heavy thud.

Stars exploded inside my head.

I staggered.



I groaned in pain. This time, I was the one who tottered backwards. It was fair to say I’d been pretty lucky to manage to fend off his follow-up attacks. As for the bash with the handle, my sturdy forehead had taken the blow, and...

“I’m... not... bleeding.”

“Looks like you’re right.”

By demonstrating a finger-chopping move, he’d drawn my attention to the tip of the blade, then taken a bold step towards me as he spun the sword around

and whacked me with the hilt. If I hadn't reacted in time and the strike had so much as hit my nose, there would definitely have been blood. In fact, though I'd managed to change the point of contact, my forehead could also have been fractured, so I could only count myself lucky that I didn't bleed.

He really was terrifyingly strong. I had a good understanding of the kinds of attacks performed from a bind where the blades were in contact. I'd been taught by Blood about the swords of the north that the Silverpeak Clan used, as well as the techniques used in a host of other fighting styles. I was a fair amount stronger than Reystov in terms of muscle, too. Yet I was always on the back foot. He was on another level in terms of the finesse of his technique, how many moves ahead his mind worked, the number of patterns of attack and defense he'd trained until they were instinctual. This was the difference that obsession, a serious attitude, and years of experience with the sword made.

Of course, I'd known he was a fearsome opponent. But I hadn't imagined just how fearsome. He was so strong. Fighting him was suffocating. There was no time to incant magic or pray for protection. I could tell that a lightning-quick thrust would come the moment I showed any sign of attempting it. He wasn't the kind of opponent you could flippantly handle while distracted by something else. The only option was to go along with him and fight with the sword, but he had the advantage in both weapon quality and technique.

He was strong. He really was strong. What was I going to do? How was I going to attack? How was I going to win? As I drew up various plans in the back of my mind, I fixed my gaze on Reystov. He glared back at me, his eyes glinting with ferocity. I understood well. My eyes as he looked at me were probably glinting in the exact same way. I wasn't smiling, and neither was he, but I was sure that on the inside, we were both grinning—with bared fangs. I had no idea that we could be *this* antagonistic to one another. I could push it *this* far with him? And still go further? And he would still go along with me? That feeling, that pride, that joy, overflowed non-stop. Everything we had trained ourselves to be capable of, that magmatic heat that built inside our bodies every time we trained, had now found a partner who could handle it at a very high level, and it was bursting to escape.

“Fun, isn't it, William?”

“Yes. It really is.”

As we pointed the tips of our blades at each other, I even found myself thinking that I didn’t want this to end. Everything else, including the original purpose of our duel, had gone right out of my mind. I just wanted, so badly, to beat him. And I was sure that Reystov felt the same.

“Round two. Don’t die.”

“You too, Reystov. Please.”

We slowly moved toward each other. Outside noise faded from the world. Rays of silver light danced in the darkness to the loud echoes of swords colliding. All that existed was our own sword and the sword of the opponent in front of us. There was no more hesitation or restraint. We both knew we would be defeated if we dared.

I roared and Reystov hissed sharply as two furious strikes engaged with each other. Then, we both took a step back.

How long had we been crossing swords? I suddenly realized that the weapon in my hand could now be mistaken for a saw blade. It probably wasn’t going to last much longer. It wasn’t a bad sword, just average, but even so, a handful more collisions and it would likely break pitifully. I had to grasp victory before that happened.

And to do that, I had to abandon the very last hint of hesitation, go all-out, and attempt to kill him.

It was the only way to win against him.

I breathed in, then out.

“On the flame.”

“On the steel of Silverpeak.”

And with those few words, spoken like prayers, two rays of gleaming silver crossed paths.



The end was anticlimactic. Fresh blood splattered onto the ground. It was as

though a spell had broken. All the excitement and joy of unleashing our full power and skill dissipated the moment I saw the blood dripping down.

“Looks like I lose.”

“Why...”

My sword had ripped into Reystov’s shoulder; his had pierced only air. I was unscratched.

“Why did you let up?!” I shouted without meaning to. In the last instant, at that moment when we abandoned even our concern for the other’s life and traded final blows, Reystov had let up with his sword for some reason, and his strike lost its power. He pulled all the force from his own attack, twisted his body, and “blocked” the tip of my sword with his shoulder. The excitement, the joy, the glimpse of greatness, the resolution that was moments away—all vanished into nowhere in the blink of an eye.

“Why?!”

If Reystov had just stepped towards me, one of us would surely have won. Would his sword have found its mark? Would mine? Or would we both have struck the other? Just one more second, and the duel would have reached a conclusion. It would have been a clear-cut victory and defeat that we could have shaken on. Instead, it had slipped through my fingers like a phantom and melted into thin air. I lashed out at Reystov emotionally, my excitement turning to anger that our battle had ended in such an anticlimactic way.

“Sorry,” he said. “I saw Anna crying.”

“Oh...” As soon as he said that to me, I lost my words.

“In that last moment just now, William, I might have been able to earn a win against you. But at the same time, there was a chance I wouldn’t taste victory’s sweet honey, but a cold and bitter cup of death.”

It had been exactly like that. I had no idea which of us would have won. We’d been fighting for real. Depending on the way we each chose to move our sword and the angles of our individual approaches in that last moment, a sword could have hit a lethal spot for either of us, with enough speed to kill that person instantly.

“Right at that moment, what I pictured wasn’t me standing victorious over a dragon-slaying warrior. It was the crying face of a woman. What is that if not the answer?”

Reystov had said that he wanted his sword to answer the question. Would he seek honor and glory with his sword held tightly in hand, or would he lay it down and seize love and happiness? It sounded as though he’d reached the answer before our battle had even had a chance to finish.

“Sorry.”

As Reystov said a quiet word of apology, I shook my head. “A really well-matched sword fight like that... I’ll bet a person doesn’t get to have many battles like that in a lifetime.”

“Right.”

I would have been lying if I said I was over it. I wanted to shout, “How dare you!” at him.

“How could you just up and throw a great battle like that?! Just because the point of it was to sort out your feelings doesn’t give you the right to—I’m mad at you, you know!”

“Yeah.”

Part of me was grumbling that I’d wanted to close in and settle the fight. The warrior side of me who was raised by Blood was stamping in frustration right now, grumbling and yelling and throwing a fit. But the other part of me, brought up by Mary...

“I’m mad at you, so I don’t care what you say, I’m not going to heal that wound on your shoulder!”

“I see.”

“Good!”

That part accepted this conclusion with a smile.

Reystov and I looked at each other, me with a sulky face and Reystov looking apologetic, and we both gave each other ironic smiles. “Go on then!” I said. “Off with you, Reystov, you quitter. I suggest you go get *her* to heal that up for you!”

“Yeah, I’ll do just that. She’s gonna give me an earful for this, though.”

“And it serves you right. Oh, wait, am I going to get a lecture later, too?”

“Just leave her to me.” Holding his shoulder with his opposite hand, he turned around. “William,” he said as he started to walk away.

“What?”

“My friend, you have my deepest gratitude.” Leaving only those words behind, he walked off. Still holding my utterly wrecked sword, I stood there under the light of the moon and watched him go. The night was quiet.



Reystov seemed to have bared his heart to Anna. I wasn’t about to pry into all the details, but at any rate, the very next day, they looked like quite a loving couple.

Menel put on a serious face and a solemn tone and said, “Penetrated...”

“Oh no, let’s not joke about that!”

It’s not like it didn’t cross my mind! I was thinking it, but you know, there are things you don’t say!

“How quickly he draws his sword,” Tonio said. “Reystov the Penetrator has lived up to his name. I am quite certain of it.”

“Not you too, Tonio!”

It was night time. I had sent the maids I was employing home, and the large hall of my mansion felt a lot emptier now. Four horns of ale sat atop the small square table by the fireplace, along with plates of roasted nuts, salty smoked meats, and dried fruit. Menel and Tonio were grinning broadly at each other across the table, while Al beside them only tittered.

“Right, so, no one’s gonna mind if we go on without Reystov tonight?” Menel said.

“I don’t expect so,” Tonio replied. “Let’s leave the lucky git to his own devices.”

“Yep,” I said. “On that I agree.”

Al nodded. "It's not worth going and disturbing him."

It was a busy time recently with all the chaos caused by the foul-dragon, but that was all the more reason for Reystov to want to be with the woman who was dear to him. I could understand that. "For the grace of the gods, we are truly thankful," I said, keeping grace brief. "To Reystov and Anna's health and happiness."

"Cheers." With lazy movements and not much enthusiasm in our voices, we raised our horns.

We hung out like this at my mansion sometimes, everyone bringing along booze and whatever food they had lying around. Then we all kicked back, raised our cups, and shot the breeze. We'd been holding these on the regular recently. It wasn't for anything special. It was just an ordinary gathering of just us guys. Bee did join in sometimes, but these get-togethers were a bit grungy. Mainly, it was me, Menel, Tonio, Reystov, Al, and Ghelreis. The beard-to-face ratio was staggering. We didn't make a pretty picture. The light novels of my previous world would never have allowed us; we simply weren't attractive enough.

"Reystov, though. Who would've thought?" Menel muttered while munching noisily on some roasted beans.

Al, with froth all over his mustache, nodded. "Surprising, isn't it?"

"I mean, going on risk-filled adventures after honor and glory isn't something you can keep up for long, but still, who would've thought?"

"I was expecting Will to get the jump on him where matters of that sort were concerned," Tonio said, tearing a piece of smoked meat apart with his fingers.

"M-Me?" I tilted my head.

"A well-mannered, devout, skilled hero with assets and status and no connection to the family to worry about. That's a solid investment, if you ask me. I've heard quite a few young women on the street say they admire you, you know?"

Menel laughed loudly. "Tonio, this guy might tick all the right boxes, but he's a wimp around women."

“Ahh, that type,” Tonio said, nodding in deep understanding. “The kind of man with admirers and people who think he’s nice, but never anything more...”

I groaned, defeated. It was true, so I had no way of denying it. Apart from that offer from the god of undeath, Bee and Anna were about only the girls I had a close relationship with. And Anna was happily united with Reystov and I didn’t have that kind of a relationship with Bee. To sum up, the area around me was a woman-free zone to the point that it was actually a little sad to think about.

“W-Well, what about you, Menel?” I said. “Umm, you and Dine from Lothdor!”

“We’re not like that.” He took a drink from his horn. “And anyway, even if we were someday gonna be *like that*, you’re talking about a long wait with an elf.”

“Really?”

“You spend a good ten years figuring out each other’s personality and if you’re a good match, then you can think about getting married.”

“Gods, that is a long wait.”

“And most elves would call that ‘rushing into things.’”

Stupendously long, I thought.

Seeing my look of shock, Al gave a nervous laugh. “Well, elves do live longer than any other known race.”

It was certainly said that elves could easily live many hundreds of years, sometimes over a thousand depending on the strength of their blood. Dwarves lived about a half to a quarter as long, and as for halflings—wonderfully, no one actually knew how long they lived, thanks to a combination of their unconcerned attitude (“Who on earth bothers to keep count of age?”) and their intensely strong wanderlust.

“Once an elf ties the knot with someone, they’ll be together for several hundred years, so they marry very cautiously. If the relationship gets complicated, it can start trouble that will drag on for centuries.”

“The fact that life in the woods rarely changes might also be a contributing factor,” Tonio added. “Elves take a cavalier attitude to time, but when they come to a human village, their perception seems to change.”

He had a point. I saw elves from time to time even here in Torch Port, and they didn't leave that extreme an impression. They could probably adjust to the pace of the culture around them to an extent. They were generally clever people, after all.

"So nothing like that's going on with me. What about you, Tonio, no thoughts about getting remarried?"

"I am open to the possibility, but no, not as of right now." He gave an embarrassed smile.

Tonio had been married once already, but his wife passed away. She'd had a weak constitution and tended to fall ill easily, but she was a smart and cheerful person. After that, the trading company he was working for went bust, and he became a hawker, then met me and managed to get back on his feet. His life had been kind of a rollercoaster, actually.

Perhaps remembering his wife, Tonio's eyes glazed over for a moment. Then, he asked Al the same question that had been asked of everyone else.

"I am technically betrothed."

We stared, astonished.



"Oh?"

"The hell? No one told me."

"Please, do tell."

"Well, I'm not even sure if it's still going to happen or not..." In his usual reserved tone, Al began to explain. "A long time ago, when the dwarves were a wandering tribe, there was a time when we found a safe haven in a place called the Vale, in Grassland's Misty Valley."

"The Misty Valley..." If I remembered correctly, that was an enormous canyon in the northeast of the Fertile Kingdom.

In the eastern part of the Fertile Kingdom, there was a region called the Hundred Warring Kingdoms. The land there tended to be poor and there was a lot of wasteland. Small states run by powerful families or clans would rise to

power there and wage war against the others until they fell into ruin. Because of this destructive cycle, it wasn't a very stable region. To the north of that was a breathtakingly vast valley surrounded by foggy mountains. Hidden by dense forest, it was a kingdom of dwarves that produced several types of ore.

"Huh. We were living pretty close to each other. Actually, never mind, guess that's pretty common."

Menel's homeland, the Great Forest of Erin, was immediately north of the Misty Valley. But as for whether you could call this a huge coincidence, Menel was right that it wasn't really the case. Among all the nations of elves and dwarves in Grassland, the Great Forest of Erin and the Misty Valley were pretty large ones. If you asked an elf or dwarf in Southmark right now where they were from, about half of them would probably name one of those two.

"So, there's a woman there you promised your future to? A fiancée?"

"Something like that. My late parents made a promise that when their child was born, he would marry the—well, she was the granddaughter of the king of the Vale at the time."

"So, a princess? Fig. Hold on, then why the hell did you leave that behind and come all the way out here?!"

"Well, um, you see, the Vale has been in kind of a mess in recent years with the succession issue..." Al had a complicated look on his face.

"Succession issue?"

"Not even you know about it, Tonio?"

"The Vale is terribly insular. You will never get in as a member of another race unless you are a diplomatic envoy or someone on very good terms with them. So even for a merchant like me, I must say it is quite hard to obtain information. Most dwarves are very tight-lipped."

"I won't go into the details, but internally things were on a bit of a knife edge. Weapons were being brought out, and even bloodshed looked possible."

"Whoa..."

Arguments among one's flesh and blood do escalate easily, but if weapons

were being brought out, things had to have gotten pretty bad. If they weren't careful, next would probably be civil war, ending with the losing side's entire family and all their followers being killed.

"More than a few Iron Country refugees are there, given protection by the Vale two hundred years ago. The two places are on opposite sides of Middle-sea, of course, but there was still some intermingling, and there were people who had relatives in the other place. So anyway, when this kind of disagreement reared its head, certain people started to get ideas about how they could involve the group of people who formerly lived in the Iron Country and use them for their own ends."

"Ah..."

Al was the last member of the royal family of the Iron Country. If they could lure him over to their side, they would be able to get the support of the former people of the Iron Country in the fight for the throne. It was a dangerous situation for Al to be in. The people around him probably realized that.

"So, it was to make sure nothing happened to you?"

"I think that was definitely part of the reason everyone sent me away. I practically had to run away under cover of night."

As people of the Iron Country, they couldn't risk the final member of their royal line dying a violent death caught up in the conflict over the succession. Perhaps they thought up some excuse, like a group of old dwarves wanting to go back to their homeland, and stowed him away to get him out. Al's life had its share of drama as well...

"So whether the marriage is still on or not depends on the outcome of the fight for the succession. Not even I know how it's going to turn out."

"Would you be happy if it's still on?" I asked.

"I'm not sure..." Al seemed to think for a moment. "It isn't as though I was ever close to her. The dwarves of the Vale are strict about the separation of men and women. So all this about a promise of marriage doesn't quite feel right to me, but I do hope she's okay."

At some point, our lazy gab about nothing had turned surprisingly serious.

“Al, the next time I go to Whitesails, I will do some investigating for you to find out how things currently stand.”

“Me too,” Menel said. “I’ll, uh—” He paused. “Figure out a way to bring it up with the adventurers from the north.” The two of them smiled at him.

He bowed deeply to them. “Thank you, Tonio, Menel.”

Then, to loosen up the atmosphere, Menel grinned. “Getting married is such a pain in the ass, huh? You’ve gotta think about parents, family...”

“Yes, it really is a rigmarole. Oh, come to think of it, I’ve never met him, but Anna’s father, wasn’t he the head of the temple in Whitesails?” Al grinned back at Menel. “I hope he’s a nice person who will approve of their marriage!”

He said it casually, but a deep silence fell.

“U-Um... Hello?”

Confused by the profound silence, Al looked around at everyone, but we were too deep in thought to answer. Of course—how had I forgotten? It was Bishop Bagley. The person Reystov had to take on to get permission for this marriage was *Bishop Bagley*. In this world, if a man and a woman were to be joined, the permission of the parents was very important.

“I wonder how he’ll react,” I said at last.

“Go stark-raving nuts?”

“You never know. He might be surprisingly accepting of the idea.”

It was anybody’s guess.

Reystov “the Penetrator” vs. Bishop Bagley—a fight card I’d never imagined had sprung out of nowhere.



What on earth did the future have in store for Reystov and Anna? I greeted the morning of the following day with that thought in the back of my mind. As usual, I prayed to my god and then started training. No matter what else was going on, it was important to keep making small efforts day-in, day-out.

“Four...” I grunted. “Five...”

I was in my yard. Exhaling slowly, I pulled two stones up to chest-height using simple handles I'd made from a training rope, one held in each hand. These stones were about the size of a baby's head, but they had Signs carved in them to increase their weight. I had converged mana into them before training.

The thick straw rope creaked under the weight. The stones were comically heavy. There was no way I could do this quickly, so I summoned all my strength and lifted them up slowly. Al was also pulling up stones beside me, red-faced and dripping with sweat.

"Nine... Ten!"

A long groan came from Al.

The rope creaked with every rep. My muscles were screaming that they couldn't take any more. I grit my teeth and ignored them. "Keep... at it...!"

"Yes, sir...!"

Al and I lifted the stones several more times, finally reached our limit, and set the stones back on the ground. The ropes and the rocks landed back down with a heavy thud and sank into the ground a bit. We both sat down on the spot and caught our breath.

After warming up with a training run and some stretches, we'd been constantly torturing the muscles throughout our bodies with the murderous weight of these stones with Signs carved into them. My muscles had been worked hard and felt hot. That was proof that the training was working. Unable to speak, I rested for about a minute and a half as I felt warmth fill my entire body. Then, I stood up again and said, "Okay! Let's do another lap! This is when it's important to push yourself!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" Al came with me.

After that, we did another set of stone exercises in various positions: picking them up, pushing them up, lifting them up, and so on. Then we collapsed and gathered our breath. "Okay! Let's do another lap!"

Al was already at the point of exhaustion. His eyes shimmering, he finally cried uncle.

“But you just said that!”

“This is when it’s important to push yourself!”

“You just said *that* as well!”

Yep, that I did, I thought. But this is important. Clapping my hands onto his shoulders, I looked him in the eyes.

“Listen, Al.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“There’s nothing more fun than lifting something heavy off the ground.”

Al gave me a shocked look that said, “You’re serious.”

“At least, that’s what you have to believe while you’re training. Now, with a smile...”

“Th-There’s nothing more fun than lifting something heavy off the ground!”

And so we fired ourselves up with forced smiles and, together, we did another lap. By the time I had pushed myself to my absolute limit, Al had dropped to the ground, completely wiped out.



“Y-You were really fired up today...”

“Oh, uh, right. Sorry. I got carried away. Sorry for making you go along with that.”

While recovering from my fatigue, I gently went through the motions of a few spear techniques, and to wrap up we did some fighting practice with sticks, the ends of which I had wrapped in cloth and cotton. Al was on his last legs. He did well to stick with me until the very end.

This had probably been the influence of my battle with Reystov. Even I thought I’d been a little too enthusiastic today. Overworking was a thing as well. Training too much was just as bad as too little.

“But you did well to keep up.”

“Thanks!”

Al's strength and stamina were quite impressive at this point. The characteristically stocky nature of dwarves certainly helped, but I could really tell that he had been working hard at his training without slacking off, even when I hadn't been around to watch over him.

"After fighting all those battles one after another in that mountain, I realized the importance of being able to fight when you're exhausted."

I nodded. It really was important to be able to put up a decent fight even when you weren't at your best.

As a sport, fighting involved keeping in good shape so you'd be in peak form on the day, and facing off against your opponent in that condition. But in a real battle, you weren't necessarily going to be in top form. In fact, fighting in less-than-ideal form was probably more common. Extreme tiredness from traveling from place to place and fighting battle after battle, food and water shortages, injuries and illness—even while suffering from these conditions, a warrior had to swing around his heavy weapon and slam it countless times against his enemies and their shields.

Less-than-perfect conditions were the hallmark of real battles, and muscle was exactly what was necessary to deal with that. When it came to sophisticated moves, there was a lot to think about: how to sequence them, the timing, the conditions that would make them a good choice, and more. Repeated attacks relying on brute strength, however, could be performed even when you were so exhausted that you couldn't think straight. "Rough and simple strength," where you could pose a serious enough threat just by randomly firing off ordinary attacks, was sometimes superior to "intricate and complicated strength." And most important of all...

"Anyone can get muscle just by training and eating a lot."

Some advanced techniques required a certain type of aptitude. Not everyone could learn every technique. But anyone could train to have strength and stamina, even if they were a little bit clumsy, just so long as they didn't have any physical issues. I even thought that these kinds of factors might actually be the most important part of military strategy.

"So make a little progress every day," I continued. "I'm not around a lot of

days, but keep up with your training on your own, and please don't forget to switch things up every so often." Then, dropping the deadpan voice, I declared the end of our training. "Alright, that's it for today! Eat a hearty breakfast so your training doesn't go to waste!"

I watched Al slowly stagger off towards the mansion, then went around casting the Word of Negation on all the stones. If I left a large number of stones with abnormal weights lying around, it could cause some kind of accident.

Incidentally, this also doubled as magic practice. While incanting one Word of Negation, I wrote another by hand, and as I wrote a Word of Negation with one hand, I wrote the Words *Lumen* and *Tenebrae* alternately with the other, canceling them both out. Double-casting magic also required steady training.

As I cancelled the *Pondus* Sign engraved on each of the stones, my mind once again drifted back to Reystov and Anna.

I'd given it a lot of thought, and I was pretty sure that Bishop Bagley was indeed going to be angry. After all, he was a religious man with common sense. Reystov may have been a renowned and hard-working adventurer, but he was also a flinty-eyed man of uncertain age with unkempt hair and a scruffy beard who clearly had connections to some unsavory people. The bishop probably wouldn't be happy about letting such a man have his daughter. But Reystov was a friend. If he was going to put down his sword, I wanted to offer him the best work I could find and help him to win over Bishop Bagley. I was already indebted to our tubby and short-tempered bishop, but maybe I could grovel...

Just then, I heard a voice from behind me.

"You're good at that. Is there a trick to it?"

It was a voice I was very familiar with.

"I just practiced until I could do it somehow," I replied while drawing several symbols with both hands. I didn't bother to turn around. I only had a couple more stones to do and I'd be done. "I started with drawing a circle in the air with my right hand while drawing a square with my left one."

"Hmm. That's trickier than it sounds."

"It is, isn't it?" As I spoke, I wrote a Word of Negation with a finger on my

right hand while writing a Word that broadened its range into the air with my left. The fingers I had converged mana into glowed with ghostly light as they moved, inscribing letters into thin air. The Word of Negation, which added a negative sense to already emitted Words, easily dispelled the effect of the Signs carved into the stones. I hadn't made the Signs that potent in the first place, to make it easier to clear them away later.

"I struggled a lot at the beginning, too," I said, turning around as I spoke. "My grandfather shouted—"

My eyes widened. The person before me was not a flinty-eyed man of uncertain age with unkempt hair and a scruffy beard. It was a confident young man with refreshingly short hair and a beard that was neatly trimmed. He was wearing an impressive northern-style formal outfit. The white fur made it look warm.

"Wait... what?"

Was he a completely different person with a similar voice? That was my first thought.

"It's me," he sighed, pulling me back to reality.

"Wh—" This person with princely features who could definitely pass for someone in his twenties was—

"Reystov." In his voice, he gave his name.

"*What?!*" I shouted in shock.

Anna's head popped into view from behind Reystov, and she stuck out her tongue. "Isn't it incredible? He asked me to cut his hair and... well, I was a little surprised!"

"Y-You're telling me!"

She giggled. "Oh, and thank you for what you did the other day. I caused you a lot of trouble."

"No no, you're very welcome..."

As Anna and I exchanged pleasantries, other people started to gather, wondering what I could have been shouting about. As expected, each of them

went wide-eyed in shock or cried out in surprise.

“No waaaay.”

Menel, for instance, was staring at Reystov, blown away by his appearance.

“Ooh, now that is a nice coat.”

“It was my father’s. My uncle passed it down to me along with my sword when I left home.”

“The winter coat of a snow-white wolverine... I must say, not every day do I have the fortune to see something like that.”

And that was Tonio, gazing at Reystov’s outfit in admiration.

“Wow! Reystov, that suits you so well!”

Al gave his earnest praise of Reystov’s dignified appearance, and Ghelreis also showed up and hummed in approval. It really was an incredible transformation.

“Hell, you might look more like a paladin than the Paladin.”

“Hey!”

Menel cackled. “Real talk, though. This might be enough even for that grumpy old fart, don’t you think?”

“Oh!” He had a good point. If Reystov looked this presentable... But I quickly changed my mind and shook my head. “Bishop Bagley’s not so easily swayed.” Reystov may have changed his appearance, but we’d never get so lucky that Bishop Bagley would let something as trivial as that mislead him.

“I wouldn’t have thought so either.” Reystov nodded. “The right approach has to be holding a good job and living life diligently for a while, and only then going to ask him permission.”

That was absolutely the right way to look at it. It was hard to believe that those words had come from a so-called “madman” who had taken pleasure in going after monsters of all kinds, chasing honor and glory. But I thought the seriousness behind them was pure Reystov. When he decided to do something, he was very thorough about it.

“Therefore, with all who are present here as my witness, I supplicate you.”

“Huh...?” I tilted my head in confusion as Reystov got down onto one knee in front of me.

“Faraway Paladin, William G. Maryblood. Warrior who carries the Torch. Liberator of Lothdor and the Iron Country. Wise one versed in the old Words, he who is beloved by the Goddesses. Hero of our generation, who crushed the wyvern, impaled the chimera, and finally slayed the foul-dragon.”

I’d heard of this from Blood. It was a specific, very old-fashioned format of speech.

“My name is Reystov, descendant of Nylav, given life in Volt’s Stove in the Ice Mountains of the distant north. A scarcely educated, unmannered deviant, a vagabond in search of the shining star of glory. A man with naught to his name, who relinquished even the sword in his hand, that the one he loved might be his to hold in its stead.”

It involved singing many praises of the other person and their accomplishments, and putting yourself down repeatedly as you spoke of your own history.

“Although I am powerless and incompetent, if you would find even the most humble position for me as one of your retainers, I should be most overjoyed.”

This speech, following the prescribed ancient format, was unmistakable. It was the speech used when *requesting to serve a lord in government*. I was so surprised, I couldn’t think of what to say for a while.

“Am I superfluous to requirements?” he prompted.

“No, not at all!” I felt confident in saying that even without his sword, Reystov would be a very useful person to have around. He was well-connected and had a wealth of knowledge. He could negotiate with people at all levels of society. He had all kinds of skills. But I hadn’t quite anticipated him asking to serve me. I couldn’t offer him any especially amazing compensation. “But why me?” I asked.

“If I have to bow my head to someone, it might as well be someone who’s worth it, right?” Reystov looked up at me and grinned. It was very contagious. I cracked a wry smile myself.

As Anna looked at the two of us, I could tell that her expression was full of mixed emotions, but overall, it was gentle.

On that perfectly ordinary morning, Reystov gently laid down his sword.



A few months later in spring after the new year had passed, I found myself in a room at the heart of the Whitesails temple. The room was quite large, there were rows of desks and reading stands, and the shelves on the stone walls were packed with countless scrolls and bundles of paper. However, it felt more cluttered than majestic. The room was used for all kinds of jobs: managing financial books and records and the yearly event schedule, keeping records relating to the people at each temple, creating registers and invitations to various kinds of functions, and more. It was the central office for desk work in the main temple of Whitesails. Normally, it was a noisy hive of activity packed full of priests engaged in conversation, but right now, you could have heard a pin drop.

At the back of the office, on the other side of the widest desk, wearing luxurious priest's robes interwoven with gold and silver thread, sat Anna's adoptive father, Bishop Bart Bagley. His stout body planted firmly in his chair gave me the impression of a massive boulder.

Reystov, dressed in his formal white fur coat, stood tall beside Anna in front of the desk, with his hand placed on the left side of his chest, and spoke. "Father—"

"I hope for your sake that you mean to address me as a bishop!" His thunderous yell was enough to make the skin quiver. The priests in the room flinched. After discovering that Reystov had come to request Anna's hand in marriage, curiosity had gotten the better of them, and they had missed their opportunity to get up and leave. I felt sorry for them.

Bishop Bagley always wore an irritable expression, but today was worse than ever. A blood vessel stood out on his temple, pulsating. "So you are the adventurer who worked his wiles on Anna."

"Father, he—"

“Anna, you hold your tongue!” He punctuated the last word with a loud slam of his fist against the desk.

His vociferous attitude caused Anna’s breath to catch for a moment, but she pushed ahead. “He isn’t an adventurer anymore!”

The moment she answered back, Bishop Bagley exploded with rage. “It’s the same difference! The gods know what kind of history this man has! You are *shameless!*”

Anna was shocked speechless.

“An adventurer? A risk-taker with gods-know-what background? You expect me to allow this?!” As he shouted, the bishop grabbed an earthen jug from the desk and threw it. Narrowly missing Anna, the jug crashed against the wall, breaking violently into pieces and splashing the water inside everywhere. The female priests present—if memory served, they were also the adopted daughters of Bishop Bagley and effectively Anna’s sisters—yelped in surprise.

I silently watched this unfold from my position a little behind Reystov and Anna. I had come along to speak to Reystov’s standing and character. However, this was their stage. It wasn’t my place to jump in.

Nevertheless, Bishop Bagley’s eyes turned on me. “And you, neophyte! I left my daughter in your care, and this is what happens?! What do you have to say for yourself?!”

“Nothing.” I met his glare straight-on. “It is my belief that this brave warrior, Reystov, is of suitable character to marry your daughter.”

He snorted dismissively. “Lies dull your Words, sorcerer. I hope that one was worth it.” He sat back down on his luxurious chair and sank deeply into it. The chair creaked. And then the bishop went quiet, and an oppressive silence began to fill the room.

“Father,” Reystov said, opening his mouth again. Bishop Bagley folded his arms and only gave Reystov the slightest glance, making no attempt to answer him. “I hear you saying that your daughter cannot be wed to a risk-taker of dubious origin, and you are very right to say so. That is why I now serve the Paladin, and refrain from taking dangerous—”

The bishop barked a laugh. “I’ve heard about that. You put your sword away for a few months. How much does that really tell me?”

“You are also very right to be suspicious. Should you ask me to do so, I intend to swear an oath, as strong as you wish, to the gods at this temple.”

At those words, Bishop Bagley went quiet. By “strong,” Reystov was referring to something like, “Should I betray this oath, may lightning strike me down and rend me asunder.” In this world where gods existed and Words carried power, such an oath required considerable resolve. Nothing would necessarily happen if you broke it, but you also couldn’t ignore the possibility that the gods might be in the mood to make it reality. Stories of people who kept trifling with the gods by making false vows and received divine punishment for it were a staple of fairy tales in this world as well.

As Bishop Bagley remained silent, Reystov continued. He was very wordy today, having clearly abandoned his usual terseness. The meaning of the gesture he made as he spoke, placing his hand over the left side of his chest, was of course, “I swear it on my heart.”

“Father, I love Anna. I would spare nothing to be with her. I may have much to learn in life, but I will devote it fully to making Anna happy.” He spoke quietly. I could feel the sincerity in his words. “If problems arise, I will resolve each and every one as they come. I will do everything in my power to that end, abandoning everything that must be abandoned and obtaining everything that must be obtained.”

He took one step closer to the desk and bowed.

“Please grant us permission to marry.”

It was a very passionate plea. Anna’s sisters throughout the room were quietly squealing with their hands over their mouths. Even I had been so captivated by Reystov’s marvellous speech that I’d failed to realize I had also become nothing more than a member of the audience. I thought the sight of Reystov and Anna standing side by side as they directly faced off against the bishop was very beautiful.

But even after Bishop Bagley had listened to Reystov’s speech and seen him bow, his expression remained stubborn.

“Let us imagine—” The bishop’s tone changed. He no longer yelled. Instead, his voice was quiet, yet deep and resonant. “Let us imagine that I were still to say no. That *I don’t like you*. What would you do?”

“I should come to visit you like this as many times as necessary.”

“You are from different worlds. Anna and I may not be related by blood, but she is my daughter. I can find any number of partners for her that are more wealthy and more exalted than you.”

“I should love your daughter more dearly than any of them, and make her happier still.”

“In that case—”

I saw an icy glint in Bishop Bagley’s eyes.

“What if I still said no, and I told you that I would confine Anna in this temple, kick you out of here, and give notice to bar you from entering?”

I thought I felt the temperature in the room drop.

“Imagine that no matter whether you sat here all day in protest or begged the Paladin over there to negotiate for you, even if you gained the support of His Excellency himself, I refused to listen to any of it, sent Anna off to Grassland, and had her wed to an appropriate partner.” His tone was tremendously intimidating, to the point that it felt as if it exerted physical pressure. “A scoundrel has attempted to lay hands on my daughter. It would be an appropriate response, don’t you agree? I am in fact considering it. And if I did, what would you do about it? What *could* you do?”

Bishop Bagley’s eyes had the ice-cold quality of a deep-water shark. But even when confronted with those eyes, Reystov’s back was as straight as a board. “What could I do?” he said. “I could make off with her.”



He stretched an arm around Anna’s waist and pulled her towards him. “No matter where you confine Anna, I will find her and steal her away. And make her happier than anyone. Simple as that.”

His clipped tone caused the bishop’s expression to twist. “You have some

nerve...”

“Do you think any man proposes without total determination to see it through?”

In comparison to the stubbornly intimidating bishop, Reystov’s response was quiet—yet full of power and resolve. Bishop Bagley’s lips remained closed for a while, and finally he snorted again and said, “Bride kidnapping. I dare you to try.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“I have no intention of allowing you to succeed! But if you want to try, on your own head be it! What happens to you is no skin off my nose!”

I noticed that Bishop Bagley’s tone had softened a little. Bride kidnapping—marriage by abduction—was a practice found all over the world in my previous life. The nature of the practice varied a lot in both worlds.

“That is, of course,” the bishop scoffed, “*if* you are able to find both accomplices willing to aid you in a kidnapping against the temple *and* a residence in which to conceal her!”

However, after that comment... Yeah, I could guess what form of “bride kidnapping” the bishop was hinting at here. He was blustering in a way that felt forced and looking in my direction with intense eyes that said, “Am I making myself clear?!” So there was no doubt in my mind.

“Anna, you stay here! Reystov or whatever your name was, out, now! And never come back!”

Reystov and Anna looked at each other for a moment. Then, without saying another word, Reystov gave Bishop Bagley a very deep bow and walked out of the temple on his own.

The bishop waited until he’d seen that Reystov was completely gone, and irritably puffed air out of his nose again. Then he called together all the priests who were still in the office and instructed them to keep Anna locked in a room. He was even so nice as to mention, out loud right in front of me, which room she was to be shut in. And so everyone except the bishop and I left the office.

“Hm?” He looked at me as though he’d only just noticed me. “Oh, you’re still here. You have such little presence, I forgot all about you.” He narrowed his eyes. “You brought trouble to my door again.”

“I brought you auspicious news. Some gratitude would be appreciated,” I said, being a little snarky.

“Dream on.” Then the bishop cleared his throat. “I am making myself clear?” he asked in a low voice.

“I will do it with finesse and hurt no one.”

“Hah. I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He very transparently feigned ignorance. “Oh, and I am just talking to myself now, but...”

“All right.”

“It seems there are those in this world who would throw away a sword capable of tearing the scales from a dragon for the sake of a single woman. Utter foolishness, don’t you think?”

I said nothing.

“No one would criticize a man for wearing a sword and being prepared in the event of crisis, so long as he does not put himself in any unnecessary danger. How foolish. Utterly foolish.”

I only nodded. He was talking to himself, so it would be strange if I responded.

“Paladin.”

“Yes?”

“How do I say this... She is serious to a fault, and not only that, she always tends to take a step back and let someone else make her decisions for her. She’s probably the kind who’s bad at finding happiness.”

The bishop gazed somewhere far away as he spoke. He normally had a stern expression, but now it seemed somehow lonely. “Happier than anyone, he says.” He let out a single, humorless laugh. “Would you tell him it’s up to him now?”

I simply nodded firmly.



There isn't much to say about what happened after that.

Reystov and I, as well as a few other people whose assistance we asked for, including Menel, were able to steal Anna from the temple without any problems. Not only did we have the foul-dragon slayers as members of our kidnapping team, word had gotten around from Anna's sisters who had been in the office at the time, so everyone was already on the same page. There was no way they could have stopped us, and they had no intention of doing so. Just when I was starting to worry that the holy warrior on guard duty might have noticed our presence as we snuck in, he "suddenly got tired" and disappeared into the chapel. It was so blatant that I had to suppress a laugh. Of course, Anna didn't make any attempt to resist either. In fact, she was very cooperative. So there really was nothing to give us any trouble.

It did technically count as unlawful trespassing and abduction, but I was sure my god would forgive me for it. After all, it was her revelation that had told me about all the good entry points. I could never be so rude as to ask her, "So do you actually quite like human love stories and stuff like that?" but she might actually have been pretty eager about this.

In any case, having stolen Anna away, we took her back to Torch Port. The pair of them had just started to live a new life in a small house beside my mansion when a priest who I supposed counted as Anna's brother turned up saying, "I have been sent here to take back Anna." Straight away, I jumped in to wine and dine him, and after only a little alcohol, he declared, "I am drunk. Oh no, I took a bribe," in a deadpan voice, and left laughing.

A few days later, a letter arrived from the bishop. Paraphrasing, it said, "This is not really a marriage I can allow, but my daughter was taken from me by force, and the man I sent to take her back was bought. There is nothing more I can do. Therefore, I reluctantly acknowledge the marriage." The seething wording of the letter was at odds with the truly gentle handwriting in which it was written.

The customs of bride kidnapping and marriage by abduction were also hotbeds for hostile abduction and rape, so in my previous world they were on

the decline as the world became more conscious of human rights. However, when they functioned in a sensible way in an era like this, how nice they were. Even if two people were from different levels of society and the man couldn't pay the bride price, all it took was for the couple to have feelings for one another and friends around to help them.

"Not as if he can do anything about it now that she's been taken," Menel said, laughing with a cup of drink in one hand.

"Yes, there's not much you can do at that point," I said, nodding and laughing, too.

It was an evening in spring. Straw had been laid out across the hall of my mansion, where a small party was being held to celebrate the holy matrimony of Reystov and Anna. Brightly colored cloth had been strung along the walls, the partygoers spilled out into the yard, and the place was packed with chairs and tables brought in for the occasion.

At the far end of the hall stood Anna. She had a little makeup on and was wearing a veil and a crown of wildflowers. She was smiling. Reystov was as quiet as usual and dressed in that same formal white fur coat, but his expression was soft.

A song to bless the couple standing side by side filled the hall, sung with great feeling by Dine and several other elves of Lothdor who had come to visit Torch Port. Musical accompaniment was provided by the red-headed troubadour Robina.

Admiring the white clouds, we live on the strand

Never once dreaming of dressing in gold

The wildflow'rs ignore us on thatched cottage roof

Flourishing, withering, lives uncontrolled

How joyous the pleasures of cottage life here

Never in poorness forgetting our feelings

Never in richness forgetting our bonds

Dine and the others finished singing the old septet about a poor yet happily married couple, and Bee strummed her rebec quietly as the song ended. Then, as the last note trailed off into silence, she shouted joyfully and raised a cup. “Woo-hoo! Congratulations to the newlyweds!”

We all shouted “Congratulations!” together and raised our cups, none of us minding that we’d already done the same thing several times.

With the song over, a group of dwarves led by Al approached the couple, carrying various objects. Al said, “Congratulations on your marriage!”

“Oh my! Thank you very much!” Anna beamed at them.

The majority of their gifts were daily necessities, dwarven-made and built to last: an iron skillet, jars of different sizes, a writing desk, a long clothes chest—the list went on. But Ghelreis alone had brought something different. The gift he had brought was a brand-new fishing rod.

“We have to prove to Menel that we’re not bad at fishing—we just need the right equipment,” Ghelreis said with a serious expression.

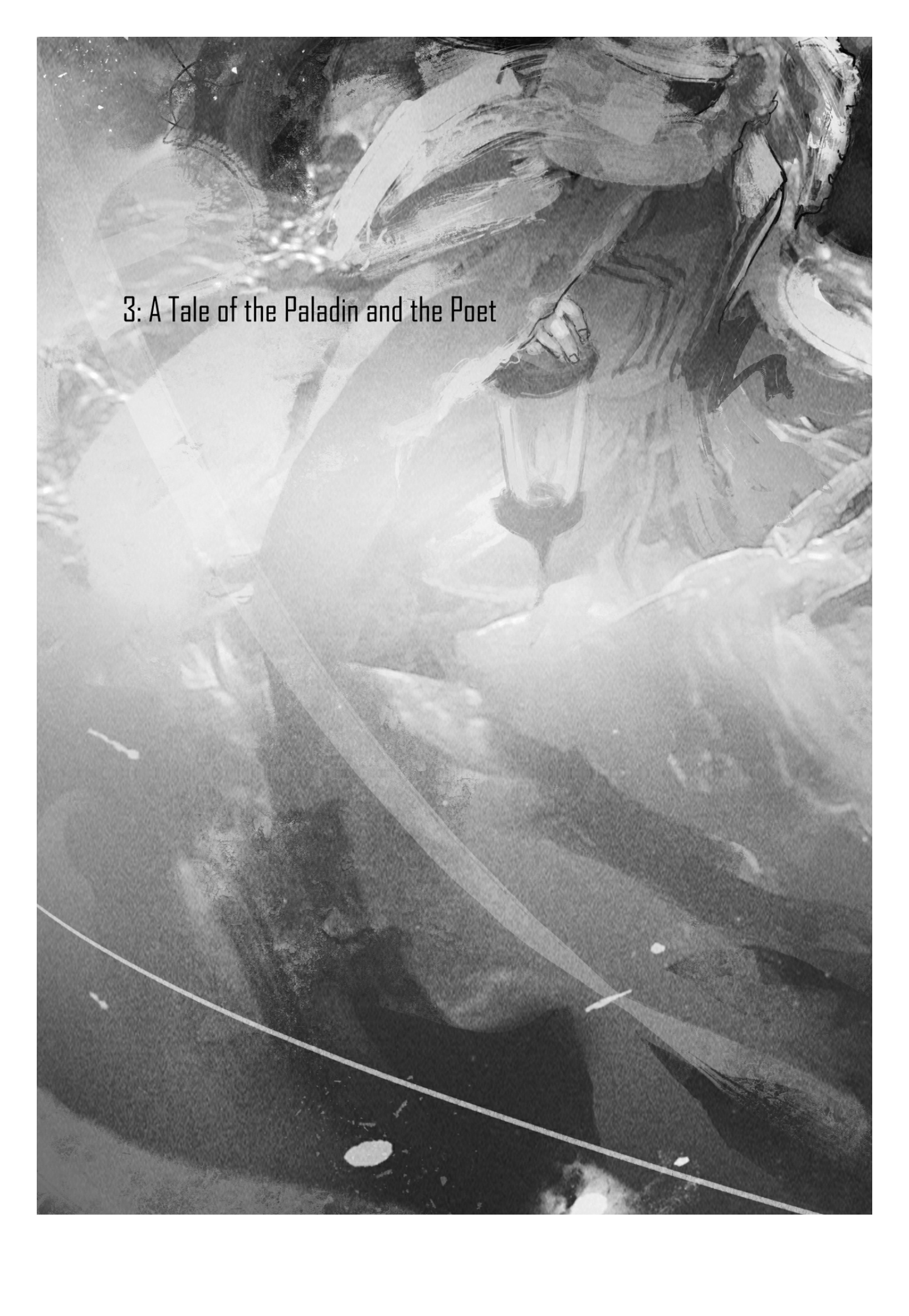
“Yeah,” Reystov replied with an equally serious nod. Everyone burst out laughing.

Cups were raised over and over in congratulation. Everyone smiled and looked like they were enjoying themselves. The wedding of two of my dear friends was a wonderful ceremony.

It wasn’t especially extravagant. There was nothing breathtaking to see. It was just a simple night-time wedding ceremony. But it was something I’d never managed to obtain in my previous world. As all these emotions welled up inside me, I raised my cup and shouted my greatest blessing with all my heart.

“Congratulations!”



A dark, atmospheric illustration in a painterly style. In the center, a figure is shown from the chest up, holding a glowing lantern. The figure's face is partially obscured by shadows. To the left, a large, curved sword or staff is visible, its blade pointing towards the bottom left. The background is filled with swirling, dark shapes, suggesting a storm or a night scene. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

3: A Tale of the Paladin and the Poet

“Yeee, it’s chilly!”

“It is, isn’t it?”

Turning back the clock, it was a morning in the middle of winter, a few days after the winter solstice. I had a cloak with a hood on as I walked down the streets of Whitesails with my troubadour friend, Bee. Although she preferred light clothing, she couldn’t handle cold weather and was wearing a super thick, soft, and fluffy coat. Together with her height (the most distinguishing feature of halflings—she was only about the size of a young girl) and her soft red hair, she gave me the impression of an adorable little creature like a rabbit or something.

A thin layer of snow from the previous night lingered on the paths. Children were playing around on the streets and throwing snowballs at each other. It was very rare to see a white world like this in the warm climes of Southmark. The streets that normally looked so familiar were covered in pure white, giving me the impression that I’d wandered into a little pocket of alternate reality.

“It hasn’t snowed in forever!” Bee said, letting out a shrill cry of excitement. “So pretty!” She danced onto the snow with light feet, and after dashing forward a few steps, she spun playfully around and smiled broadly.

Very unusually, the snow that fell during the night had been enough to form a layer on the ground, so after randomly bumping into Bee in the hall of a lodge, I’d come out to have a look at the townscape with her. The snowy harbor was a fantastical sight, like something from a dream. Far away at sea, I could see the white sails of several ships.

“Did you have fun at the winter solstice festival?” she asked.

“I did. But it was tiring.”

“I bet. You have to pay attention to so many things. Like when you go around greeting all the important people with a smile. There’s no way that’s as easy as you make it look.”

“Yeah. Menel chose some clothes for me, and Bishop Bagley helped out, too. Thanks to them, I got through it somehow.”

“Oh! You had some new formal clothes made?”

“Yep. Oh, and Menel looked really cool in black.”

He had worn a conservative and graceful black satin outfit with deerskin boots and had tied up his hair. He would have upstaged actual nobility.

“Wow, I would’ve loved to see that. Menel does have a really pretty face, if nothing else!”

“Okay, okay, enough of that! How about you, did you make much money?”

She giggled proudly. “I’m raking it in with the dragon-slaying tale! Everybody and his uncle wants me to sing for them!”

The winter solstice was the greatest holiday this world had to offer. As the day with the fewest daylight hours in the whole year, it was used to mark the year’s end. In other words, it corresponded to what my old world called New Year’s Day.

There wasn’t much to do for fun during the winter in this era. Winter was normally spent working the looms, making rope, and eating unexciting food while awaiting the spring by the fireside. In times like this, the winter solstice was a precious break from the norm, and the villages, towns, and cities all celebrated it in a big way. I’d heard about the spectacle from Blood, Mary, and Gus way back when I was in the City of the Dead, but there was a big difference between hearing about and seeing.

Once the sun was seen to have risen on the morning of the winter solstice, whoever had been put in charge of the task would ring the city bell, or go around shouting the news if it was a village. At the temples, chapels, and shrines, the people showed their gratitude to the gods by slaughtering livestock or making offerings of flowers and incense. Trees from the woods were also cut down and burned in a bonfire in the town square as people danced. Of course, the cattle, pigs, and chickens that were slaughtered became the evening’s feast, a rowdy event with plenty of drinking and singing. Entertainers seized the chance to perform and went around making money. Market stalls popped up everywhere side by side, tempting passersby. The wealthy and people of status invited their associates to parties at their own homes to thank them for their daily work, expressing their gratitude to strengthen their connections. And all

this razzmatazz continued for several days, including a modest pre-celebration. That was this world's winter solstice festival.

Why did everyone make such a big deal of it? That was because the day when the sun lost most of its power was also the day when Evil gained in strength and attempted to infiltrate the circle of Good. Therefore, the point was to keep evil at bay by having a bright celebration, lighting bonfires, making sacrifices to the gods, and praying for the sun's power to return. It sounds like an excuse for drunken antics, but I remembered that on the day before I turned fifteen, when I confronted the god of undeath, he—sorry, she—had actually used the words “When that accursed sun is at its weakest.” Probably, in this world, the winter solstice really was the day when evil gained in strength. It was the time when, in contrast to the cheerful celebration of people, those who believed in evil power—those deep in the dark woods or far away in the barren wastes or in the depths of the bogs—became even more menacing.

We had just passed by an alley with hardly anyone around. My imagination went in an unsettling direction, and I sank deep into thought.

“Hm? Hey, what's with the gloomy face all of a sudden?”

“I was just thinking about whether it's okay for me to be taking it easy here right now.”

The turmoil that accompanied the awakening of Valacirca didn't just end when the foul-dragon was slain. The demons that had been driven from the Rust Mountains were still wandering all over the land. The territories of beasts shifted after they felt Valacirca awaken, and now they approached areas where people lived. And many unscrupulous individuals, some taken in by the evil gods and their kind, took this chaos as the perfect opportunity to commit a whole host of crimes. The aftereffects alone were too numerous to count. Things like that had created trouble all over Southmark, and I'd even heard that a few villages had fallen as a result, although I was yet to receive confirmation of this. This was what lurked under the surface of the good news that was the destruction of Valacirca and the celebration of the new year.

I'd come here because I was invited by His Excellency Ethel, Menel had given me a push, and I could leave Torch Port to Reystov and Anna. But even right this

moment as I walked around with Bee, weren't there things I could, *should* be doing instead? Like hunting even just one more beast, or going around providing healing to the villages?

After I explained these worries to Bee, she looked up at me with narrowed eyes and hummed vaguely. *Wh-Why?*

"Okay, so... Will, I know you must've asked Menel about this already. What did he say?"

"Well, about that—" I gave her a troubled look. "He just said, 'Fig if I know. It's the winter solstice, shut up already and lemme sleep for once.'"

She snickered.

"That's so Menel."

"Come on now, it's not funny. I'm seriously worrying about this, okay?"

By now, Menel was probably in the room of the Whitesails lodge I'd reserved for him, sleeping in late and thoroughly enjoying it. It was very inefficient to walk around the vast region of Southmark without Menel's fairy trails, so I couldn't do anything right now even if I wanted to. Of course, Menel was my friend, not an employee or something. I couldn't make him work. But that made my inability to act feel all the more stressful.

"Will, can we talk?" Bee moved to one side of the street, stopped walking, and looked up at me.

Because of her serious tone, I squatted down to meet her at eye level. Her eyes normally sparkled with curiosity and restlessly shifted focus, but now they were calm and looking straight at me. Suddenly she felt like the older one, with an adult expression nothing like her normal self. My heart skipped a beat.

"You're taking on too much," she said and flicked my forehead.

My hand instinctively flew to where I'd been hit. It hurt more than I would've thought.

"Will, look. The people who live on this continent are all either settlers who crossed the sea knowing what they were getting into, or their kids and grandkids." She spoke in a clear, singsong voice, explaining things gently to me

in the way a parent might. “They aren’t babies. They can make their own decisions in life. You’re not their one and only hope. You don’t have to watch over them every second of every day, y’know?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“If you know, then why do you have this thing about taking it all on yourself?”

“I swore an oath to my god. That as her blade I would drive away evil, and as her hands I would bring salvation to those in sorrow.”

That was the promise I’d made to receive protection from my god. Thanks to her, I defeated the god of undeath and was able to save my parents’ souls. And that wasn’t all. The god of the flame had guided me from the past life I vaguely remembered, full of anguish and regret, and allowed me to embark on a new life. When I agonized over whether to fight the dragon, she reassured me and gave me a push in the right direction. Thanks to her blessings, I was able to save a great number of wandering souls. At the end of the fight with the foul-dragon Valacirca, when I hit my limit, she protected me.

I’d received so many wonderful, resplendent things from my god. She probably wasn’t even looking for anything in return. That was why I wanted to return the favor. It wasn’t that I had to. I wanted to. I said this to Bee.

“Mm. Mm. I get you.” She nodded, a gentle smile on her face. “Overdoing it.” She flicked my forehead a second time, again before I was able to react, and again I covered my forehead, wincing. That hurt.

“You just can’t shake this side of you, can you?” She squeezed my cheeks between her hands. “Giving back to your god... I think that’s wonderful, don’t get me wrong. I support you, and I think it’s very noble to have that kind of spirit.”

Then, the girl in front of me with fluffy red hair looked straight into my eyes and said softly, “But if you want to give back, do it in a way that your god would feel *good* about, okay?”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever thought about that much.

“Feel good about?”

“Right.” Bee put her hands on her hips as if to say “I despair of you” and looked down at me. “Think about it. Let’s say someone handed you food, saying, ‘This is thanks for healing my wounds the other day.’”

“Okay.”

“And the person who handed it to you was all skin and bones and could barely stand, and looked like there was no way they’d eaten anything for at least three days.”

“I’d think, ‘What are you doing? Eat it yourself’... Oh.”

“See?”

If someone “gives back” by wearing themselves down, it troubles you and makes you worry. You can’t feel good about it. Receiving something back only makes you happy when it comes from someone who is happy themselves and can spare the gift. Then you can be proud of yourself for giving the right help to that person in the first place.

This life of mine was given to me by the god of the flame. Although I did have to fulfill my oath, if I became a slave to it and wore myself down, treated my life like it was worth nothing, brought anguish and regret upon myself, and died like that again, it would defeat the entire purpose. All the kindness my god had shown me in silently gathering the things I had once given up on and thrown away and giving them back to me—that would all be for nothing. In order to prove that the blissful gift my god had given me in guiding me to Blood, Mary, and Gus was right and gracious, I had to live right, so that the god of the flame could say proudly that she had helped me in the right way. To live right in this world—that was my resolution, and it dawned on me that I’d come close to losing sight of it.

“Experience the fun things in life! The little pleasures! Find true happiness! Eat tasty food! You can’t just let all that pass you by! And anyway, if the heroic, dragon-slaying Faraway Paladin is running around worried every single day, how d’you think everyone else is going to feel? Sure, I guess there are a lot of bad rumors going around that might or might not be true, that’s just what things are like right now, but if you just act cool about it, everyone else will ignore them, too! And plus—”

“Yeah,” I said as she rattled off everything she could think of to support me. “Thank you, Bee.” For reminding me of what was truly important, I gave her my heartfelt thanks. It was cold on this winter street covered in snow, but I felt a kind of gentle warmth inside my heart.

“Don’t mention it,” she said. “Wow, I’m awesome. I can preach to the Paladin.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know you were so good at that.”

Bee tilted her neck back slightly and gave a little proud laugh. I put my hands up, beaten. Then we chuckled together.

“Say, Bee?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to go someplace with me today? Wherever you want, just name it.”

“What’s this? I love your enthusiasm.” The girl with fluffy red hair made eyes at me and smiled coquettishly.

I blinked.

“Okay then,” she said, “I want to go to...”

She told me. I went pale.

“You’ll take me, right?”



The woods in summer felt like they were full of life. However, in winter, the impression I got from them was very different. They were cold and quiet, and time seemed to flow slowly in them. It felt like they were sleeping and having a beautiful dream.

East of Whitesails, on the other side of the wall surrounding the city, there was a deep and dense patch of woods at the foot of some hills by the sea. Woods right beside a town would normally be cut down entirely within a short space of time to meet the demand for wood, but the trees here would probably never be felled. These were forbidden woods, which acted as a border

separating the workaday world—including the city—from a certain institute: the Academy of Sages. The Southmark branch of an institute for sorcerers seeking the Words of Creation, it was located within the forbidden woods and shunned association with the everyday world.

When I came close enough to see the top of the institute beyond the snow-topped trees, I stopped in my tracks in spite of myself. The facility was enormous. Made of brick and protected by layer upon layer of Signs, it had high walls and many steeples, and arched walkways connecting each of its buildings. I knew what it looked like already, having seen it from afar in Whitesails, but now that I was close...

“Wow...”

I could tell that mana was swirling in a vortex around the facility. They had probably chosen to build it in a place where mana tended to collect naturally because of the geography. On top of that, because of the layers of Signs, the area around it had taken on a barrier-like aspect.

“Um, Bee?”

“What is it?”

As I gazed blankly at the sight in front of me, I said, “You really want to go to the Academy? You’re serious?”

“Seriously serious. There’s something I want to see.” Bee looked straight at the Academy’s towering spires. “That place isn’t somewhere a lowly poet like me can get into just by saying, ‘Can I come in for a sec?’”

“Yeah.”

The Academy of Sages distanced themselves a certain amount from the power structures of the ordinary world. The reason was simple: they had gotten too involved once before, and the result was oppression on a massive scale.

Since the pandemonium of two hundred years ago that had left many areas in a state of constant war, there had been an increase in the number of sorcerers who used the Words in service to their rulers so that they, the subjects, could be fed. In poems and songs, this was sometimes described in an extreme way as a growth in the number of “evil sorcerers.” Evil sorcerers rotted the land,

stagnated the water, and spread diseases, or so they said. In actuality, it probably wasn't all malice. There must have been a good number of gentle and kind sorcerers who decided to use Words in battle for the sake of the countries and villages they belonged to, out of the simple desire to protect the land and people close to them, or perhaps out of respect and devotion for a leader prepared to make hard decisions.

Even so, the poisons called anger and hate were a part of battle. In the same way that verbal arguments naturally get heated, when a battle got heated, the Words used became more aggressive. More opportunities soon arose to bring out a host of Cursed Words and formidable Taboo Words. And when everyone made frequent use of evil Words like these, those Word users and those around them naturally turned the same way. The land became barren, the water stagnated, diseases spread. People who feared this happening to them started witch hunts, and to get away from the witch hunts, talented sorcerers became even more dependent on those in power and sought their protection. This started a vicious cycle, and the social status of sorcerers fell dramatically for a time.

After that, several preeminent sages launched a crackdown. Political power and magic were kept a certain distance apart, and from that point on, the situation improved. However, even today, when sorcerers were seen as heroes and our power as awe-inspiring, I couldn't deny that we were still also viewed as people to be feared who made use of questionable powers.

So, in order that young and immature students wouldn't come into contact with the temptations of power and violence and behave in a way that would damage the reputation of sorcerers in the outside world, the Academy was very insular. Because of this, the only ones who could leave the Academy were those who had learned sufficient restraint as sorcerers and been given permission, or those skilled enough to escape.

Therefore, it was one thing for someone in a position like His Excellency Ethel or Bishop Bagley to enter the Academy, perhaps looking to appoint a few sages as temporary advisers or seeking a graduate sorcerer to employ, and it was another thing entirely for Bee to attempt it. The sages of the institute would take an exceedingly dim view of her request, not wanting her to come into

contact with any of the young students. As she had said, it wasn't the kind of place that would let her in just to satisfy her curiosity.

And yet sneaking in also looked difficult. The Signs I could see engraved on all those trees and rocks were probably measures against intruders, making use of the concentrated mana environment. They would probably prevent curious kids and burglars after the stores of magical wealth within from even getting close.

"But *you* could sneak in, couldn't you? You're not just a holy warrior, you're an amazing sorcerer, right?"

That magic laid on the path winding through the woods was probably Maze Alley. And I could vaguely sense the presence of a ridiculously large number of other Signs off the path as well—warning alarms, temporary paralysis, sleep, blindness...

Sensing things in this way, I gradually built a rough understanding of everything around us. Then, turning to Bee, who was looking up at me expectantly, I nodded. *Yeah*. "It's impossible!"



"Whaaa?!"

"There's no point in you going 'Whaaa'..."

For starters, I wasn't a burglar. I only had an amateur's knowledge of breaking and entering, disarming traps, and other things like that. It goes without saying that people can't do what they haven't practiced, and I wasn't about to say I could do something that I couldn't. I explained that to Bee as she continually booed me, but she didn't seem to accept it. "You could pull it off, couldn't you, Will? You know, like, cleverly using muscle!"

"The only thing I can do with muscle in this situation is breaking in through the front entrance. Or maybe I could come up with some clever way to break in from a different angle."

It would be impossible to sneak into a rigorously protected place like this with Bee alongside me. It wasn't like she had any particular knowledge about how to do it successfully. It probably wouldn't be impossible to break through by force, but that would be the same thing as directly declaring war on the Academy.

“Blood would rain from the skies. And I’m being kind of literal here.”

Although the Academy kept to themselves, they showed no mercy to those who violated their independent and closed-off nature. It was the only way an ivory tower could ever work in a world like this. If we tried to force our way in, it would ring the opening bell on a fight to the death.

“So, I’m sorry, but it’s too dangerous to sneak in without permission.”

Bee went a long time without saying anything, then finally said, “Okay.”

I told her I couldn’t guarantee her safety. She smiled back and looked up at the Academy, as though looking at something beyond her reach, with an expression as if she were stretching out a hand to the stars. I wondered what Bee wanted from the Academy. As I looked at her from the side, the red-haired troubadour had such a wistful smile...

“Well, if even you can’t do it, then that’s that, I guess!” The sad atmosphere quickly disappeared. “In that case, we’ve gone way off track, but why don’t we just go to a nice restaurant somewhere? You can treat me to some tasty food and drink and...” Bee didn’t pause for breath, smiling and talking in a cheerful voice that felt somehow fake.

Unable to stand seeing her like that, I gently took hold of her hand.

“Will?”

“*Sneaking in* is impossible...”

And it was. It was, but... after making Bee look so sad, saying I was just going to back out because it couldn’t be done would really be pathetic.

“Come with me a moment,” I said.

“Huh? Umm.”

I wasn’t very good at crafty things like creeping around quietly or sneaking in somewhere undetected. I could only think of one thing I could do for Bee, and it was far simpler.

“We’ll pay them a proper visit.”

I was going to knock on the door and plead with them with total sincerity.

Bee blinked a few times. Then a smile blossomed on her face and she gave me a big nod. “That’s a great idea!”



Just as I’d anticipated, the way to the Academy of Sages was full of wonders. The path through the woods branched in several places, and I could tell that some very old and powerful magic was affecting my senses. It made me feel like a child who had lost sight of his parents and gotten himself lost. Or like a student walking through the dark and quiet corridors of his school at night to collect a forgotten possession, being startled for an instant by the echo of his own footsteps. It was a bizarre, uneasy feeling, as if my heart were being slowly gripped in icy hands.

“W-Wait... What?” Bee said suddenly. “Which way did we just come—what? I... I’m so confused...”

“It’s okay. Keep hold of my arm.”

After walking only a little way along the trail, Bee easily lost her sense of direction. As if overcome by terrible anxiety, she turned her head frantically and shrank in fear.

“No matter what, don’t let go,” I said.

I heard her breath catch. She looked up at me, wrapped both her arms around mine, and clung on tight. I could feel the fluffiness of her winter clothes as she squeezed my arm. Then, she groaned as if she had a headache. “What is this? What *is* this? Right and left, up and down... I know those words, but when I think about them, they don’t mean anything. Everything feels so wrong, I might be sick...”

“It’s okay. It’ll go back to normal soon. Bear with it for just a little longer.”

We were walking on snow, so it should have been easy to see our footsteps, but I still caught myself almost heading in totally the wrong direction.

The workings of Words related to positional perception had been turned ambiguous. Fast was slow. Near was far. Right was left and up was down. North was south and east was west. If I went forward I’d go back, and if I went back I’d go forward. It was like the fairy tales I remembered from my past world about

mysterious dark forests. This was a fearsome barrier magic, passed down since days of old. It temporarily melted your perception of opposing language concepts into homogeneous sludge, luring people into the gaps between uncanny inverted thoughts. It was such a labyrinthine use of Words that I was prepared to call it art. Even I risked succumbing to it if I wasn't careful.

I strained my senses, concentrated on the flow of mana within my body, and resisted the magic. Scanning my surroundings, I walked forward very cautiously, taking each step one at a time. After a while, we reached a place where the path split left and right. I stopped walking and frowned.

"This is just mean," I said.

"Wh-Which one's the wrong one?"

By way of response, I drew several auxiliary Signs, my finger dancing through the air, then incanted a Word in three parts. "*Ne fronti crede.*"

The Word of Misdirection broke. The illusion dissipated like mist, and *another path leading forward revealed itself in front of us*. They had presented us two choices, left and right, and hidden a third through illusion. Bee blinked as if she couldn't believe her eyes. I almost overlooked that one myself. I would have missed it if Gus hadn't taught me the trick to placing illusions.

To the side of the newly created path, there was a tree with a single character carved into it. It was a Word of Creation, but since it was deliberately corrupted at the appropriate points to prevent it from having any magical effect, it was probably a message addressed to visitors.

"*Aut disce, aut discede.*" *Either learn, or leave.*

Realizing the meaning behind that rhyming phrase, I gave a short laugh. It seemed that the formidable magical barrier had barely begun to test us.

"Will, are you okay?" I wasn't sure what Bee had made of my wry smile, but she looked at me with concern. "I heard that even the Wandering Sage couldn't make it through Maze Alley under his own power when he was young. Don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

At those words, my mind ground to a halt.

“He couldn’t make it through?”

“That’s right. Even Gus the Sage, an incredible child prodigy, couldn’t so much as knock on the door to Grassland’s Academy of Sages without his teacher’s help. It was the chapter of his life where he discovered his own immaturity.”

Huh. So Gus couldn’t get past this when he was young.

I imagined a precocious and clever-looking boy grinding his teeth in annoyance at not being able to break through the barrier. Then the boy grew rapidly older, and when he had turned into the figure of the old man I knew so well, he barked an order at me.

You, boy, had better get it first time! Understood?

Yes, yes, I said to him, giving a resigned laugh inside my head.



The attempt to break through Maze Alley continued. There were large-scale spells that affected visitors’ perception and concept of language, and non-magical tricks to throw off your positional sense, like thick bushes that blocked line of sight and paths that were very slightly curved. The path made use of every kind of gimmick to deny entrance to intruders. The one that we ran into towards the end was especially impressive.

“Wow...”

“Eek!”

Faces had been carved into the trees on either side of the path we were walking down. Because of the texture of the bark, they reminded me of old people. Their mouths were shut into a thin line, and their vacant eyes—cavities hollowed deeply out of the tree—were open eerily wide and staring hatefully. Thick, dark-red sap dripped like tears from the dug-out holes, making the faces look even more disturbing.

“What is that, a curse? W-Will, I... those things make me feel really uneasy...”

“I don’t sense much mana at work, but...”

“I-Isn’t that what makes it suspicious? Using something obviously suspicious to hide a much smaller trick! That’s a classic!”

“I didn’t think of that...” I examined the mouths carved into the trees closely.
“Ah!”

They were simply engraved with a Sign that had the effect of making someone feel very slightly anxious. Far from a curse, the Sign only had one very subtle effect. It was a weak, trivial spell, the kind that a powerful sorcerer could incant without raising any suspicion in a healthy-minded person, even if they didn’t know of magic. But it was enough to accelerate the anxiety already created by the unsettling carvings in the trees. If we had continued forward without noticing, we would have become overcome by a groundless worry that we were on the wrong path, that we had already gone wrong, and we eventually would have made a fatal mistake in our choice of route. The magic itself was subtle and designed to be masked by the emotions you would already feel after seeing the faces, so it was hard to detect. It was an exemplary trick for constructing a barrier.

“Thanks, Bee.”

“No sweat. This one’s not for me.”

“You’re not kidding. *Fortia*.” I cast a Word to resist the effect.

“I could sing a tale of adventure about just this one thing.”

“Seriously.”

Using a path like this all the time would definitely be inconvenient, so I was sure there had to be a back entrance somewhere. Even so, I could tell that the Academy really didn’t want to make it easy for people from the outside world to visit. Turning up at the side entrance to ask for something important would go against etiquette and provide an excuse for the Academy to turn you away, and you could forget about paying a polite visit using the front entrance—the glut of tricks in the woods would ensure that you couldn’t even reach it in the first place. The lengths the Academy had gone to actually felt a bit obstinate.

We moved on, and as I started to wonder how much longer we had to go, the way before us suddenly opened up, and I heard a voice.

“Hello, do I have visitors?”



I heard the sound of a mass of snow falling from a tree and landing heavily on the ground. The way ahead had opened, and beyond the trees was a glade turned completely white with snow. Part of the glade was occupied by a small and aged-looking shrine. Judging by the emblem, it was a shrine to the one-eyed god of knowledge, Enlight. Within the shrine's boundaries, an old man sat on a log in front of a smoldering fire. Maybe the firewood was damp. The old man poked at it with a tree branch, looking dissatisfied.

He was a gray-haired man sporting a fine beard, with narrow eyes, hollow cheeks, and a somewhat bent back. He was dressed in a tidy set of work clothes with some mud around the pant cuffs, and a billhook and a sickle among other tools were attached to his belt. Nothing about him left any kind of strong impression. He looked like the kind of gentle old caretaker you might see anywhere.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," I said, placing one hand over the left side of my chest and pulling my leg back slightly. "My name is William G. Maryblood."

"I'm Bee. Robina Goodfellow!" Bee followed up cheerfully. "May we inquire your name, good sir?"

The old man smiled faintly and chuckled. "I am nothing more than the Academy's old and decrepit groundskeeper. I am certainly no one notable enough to give his name to a dragon-slaying hero. Come, you must be cold. Why not rest a while?" Dodging Bee's question, he beckoned us over and gestured for us to warm ourselves by the fire.

"Thank you very much, sir."

Although it was thin on the ground, we had been walking on a snow-covered path for a while, and my shoes had gotten quite wet. I was grateful for the fire, even if it was only smoldering. I bowed my head a little to him in thanks, and Bee and I took him up on his offer.

"I was wondering," Bee said to the old groundskeeper, "is it far from here to the Academy?"

I could see the institute through the gaps between the trees, and it looked like we still had a way to go. We'd walked a good distance already, but if

anything, it felt like we'd only gotten farther away.

"Hmm. Young miss, what reason could you have for going to the Academy? Unless I'm mistaken, you don't appear to be a new student."

"There's something I want to see," Bee said straight-out.

The old groundskeeper hummed thoughtfully, stroking his beard with a slow and deliberate motion from his jaw all the way to the tip. "But the Academy has a rule of closing its gates to those who are not sorcerers themselves..."

"Our intention is to go and ask whether we could be permitted a brief tour," I said. "It might be an inconvenience, but we'll be taking care not to cause any trouble."

"I see." The old man stroked his gray beard all the way down to its tip again. "I hope that goes well for you." He smiled warmly. Then, he fished through a bag next to him, took out a few pieces of cheese, and stuck them onto twigs. "Heat them up before you eat. They'll warm you right up. Go on."

After thanking him, Bee and I held the cheese over the fire. Once it was slightly melty, I brought the cheese to my mouth. Alongside the melt-in-your-mouth softness of the cheese, its distinctive aroma filled my nose and its rich flavor spread around my tongue.

"Mmm, that's so *good*!" Bee was in heaven, with her eyes closed and a hand against one cheek. "This cheese must be made from goat's milk!"

"Very perceptive. Take a few more if you like it."

"Yay!" Bee cheered.

Getting even this far had been pretty nerve-wracking, so we were both happy for a fire and warm food. I couldn't be as animated as Bee, but I ate the goat's cheese with a huge smile on my face. This really was good!

"Oh yes, Faraway Paladin, I hear that you have a grounding in magic?"

"I have been taught to some level."

The old man gave a meaningful hum and spoke quietly. "As groundskeeper, I sometimes have the chance to witness the magic of the students at the Academy and, well, I would dearly like to see what the magic of a dragon-

slaying hero is like.”

Bee and I exchanged glances. That question was definitely a test. *There was no way an ordinary old man would be in a place like this.* And if he was asking me to use magic for him out of curiosity...

“Magic cannot be used frivolously. I hope you understand.”

“Is that so...” The old groundskeeper again stroked his beard. “I can’t possibly convince you?”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Is that your usual attitude to these things?”

“Yes. Those words are my teacher’s, and I make an effort to abide by them.”

Just as I had learned from Gus when I was young, magic was a dangerous thing not under humans’ complete control. Small magic used efficiently was the fundamental rule, and ideally not even that. It wasn’t a good idea to recklessly make a spectacle of magic just because someone asked.

“Hmm. Hmmm.” The aged groundskeeper stroked his beard with the same slow motion. “Then may I ask a favor of you?”

“And what might that be?”

“The trees are very damp from last night’s snowfall, and the fire is having a hard time catching today. It’s making things very hard on these old bones.” The fire was certainly giving off a lot of smoke and looked like it could easily sputter out. “I’d like some dry firewood. Could I ask your help?” He smiled. “You can use magic if you like.”



It would only have taken a single Word—*Siccus*—for me to solve this problem. But the old man was smiling and watching us.

“We’ll collect some branches from the woods.”

The branches lying all about the woods were probably all damp, but that wasn’t a difficult problem for either Bee or myself to solve. We nodded at each other. Then, together, we collected some branches, borrowed the old man’s

billhook to cut them to roughly the same size, and *placed the damp branches in groups by the fire*. After a little while, steam started pouring from the ends of the sticks. Easy enough. If this was some kind of test, then what was being tested was whether we had the commonplace knowledge that damp wood should be dried by a fire.

“Oh, I’m very grateful. That’s much warmer.” The groundskeeper sat in front of the stronger fire with a good-natured smile on his face.

If he had been testing us, some kind of reaction could have been expected, but he said nothing about passing or failing. He just gave us a friendly smile, offered us more cheese and bread, and started making small talk, asking us in a gentle tone whether we had a good time at the winter solstice festival. Maybe I was too on edge. Maybe this old man really *was* just a simple groundskeeper? I thought about it for a moment. It was true that something felt a bit off, but it wasn’t as if I couldn’t think of any number of explanations. In that case, staying here would be a waste of time. I had to take Bee to the Academy. Maybe it would be better if we took our leave and started searching for the next path...

— *Experience the fun things in life! The little pleasures! Find true happiness! Eat tasty food! You can’t just let all that pass you by!*

Bee’s words came back to me. I let out a small laugh at myself. I was acting hasty again. It seemed to be a bad habit of mine. I was like this that time I got into a fight with Menel, too.

“You have good taste, old man!” Bee said cheerfully. “This is all really good!” Bee had a smile on her face as she enjoyed the bread and cheese, and even started thrumming her rebec. Maybe she was just in that much of a good mood. There was no sign of haste in her expression at all.

So I decided to learn from her and take it easy as well. After all, we’d come out together today for fun. There had never been any need to take the shortest distance to our objective. There was no point in getting impatient and rushing things.

I stepped back for a moment. I was on an expedition with a troubadour girl through a magical forest where sorcerers lived, sitting around a fire with an old man who was a groundskeeper. This was an exciting experience I could never

have imagined having in my previous life. How could I not make the most of this?!

In the winter woods, we sat around the fire and talked and laughed about little things we remembered from past journeys, our favorite foods, and our stupid mistakes. I listened to Bee's songs, enraptured, and applauded her.



At a certain point, the old groundskeeper asked us a question. “If I may ask a question of the two of you,” he began. “Supposing there is such a thing as ‘great magic’ in this world—what do you think it is?”

Great magic. Hmm. I started to think a bit about it—but Bee answered off the cuff.

“Magic that makes people happy?”

Her answer was like a revelation to me.

“It could be the simplest Word for a distraction or the most wonderfully complicated and artistic Sign. I think they’re all as great as one another if they’re woven with a wish for happiness.” Her words, spoken with a smile as radiant as the sun, echoed around the woods and were absorbed by the snow.

“That’s a fascinating opinion. Why do you think that, young miss?”

“Because that’s the way Will actually uses magic! That’s why I quite like him. I really don’t think much about the way he keeps putting his own happiness second, though!”

“I see, I see.” The old gatekeeper stroked his beard one more time.

“Marvellous.”

The next moment, to my total shock and confusion, the scenery warped. The next thing I knew, a wall stretched out before me. The woods around where the shrine had been were gone. The steeples I’d seen in the distance were gone. And we were right in front of the enormous door to the Academy of Sages.

Bee had eyes like saucers, and I unconsciously steeled myself. This probably wasn’t teleportation. More likely, we had been deceived by an illusion and hadn’t been able to notice that the true Academy was right beside us.

“Allow me to introduce myself properly.”

But when on earth had he done it? How had he cast that on us? I was being vigilant—at least, I thought I was—

“I am a professor at the Academy of Sages, the Master of Woods, Master Hiram.” The old man smiled and stroked his beard. “I am also the groundskeeper.”



“I will make a small exception for you and take personal responsibility for your tour.”

And so, without any trouble, we got permission to go inside the Academy. It seemed that the old groundskeeper, a.k.a. Master Hiram, had indeed been testing us.

“Young miss who plays wonderful songs, what is it that you desire to see in the Academy?”

“Mm, well...” Bee smiled and whispered something into the old man’s ear.

“I see,” Master Hiram said, nodding and stroking his gray beard again. “Words can be blunt or sharp, light or heavy, depending on how one chooses to use them.” He put out the fire. “I can see that you two are not the type to injure yourselves with your own Words.” After giving us that aphorism to think over, he said, “I did enjoy that. Well, off we go, then.”

Master Hiram headed for the Academy with a spring in his step. Reaching the entrance, he spoke a couple of Words. The massive door slowly ground open. Though his appearance, the impression he gave off, and everything else about him were totally different, for some reason, I saw Gus’s back overlap with his. And then—

“Wow, what?! What is *that*?! A doll is doing the cleaning?!” The very moment after Master Hiram led us inside the Academy, Bee started getting really worked up.

“That is a golem made by a previous Master of Forms. Very useful.”

Immediately after we had gone through the main entrance, Master Hiram, who had agreed to show us around, directed our attention to a courtyard with a fountain, surrounded by hallways. There, a doll was sweeping up. It was a type of golem, I supposed, with a somehow feminine shape.

It must have taken an awful lot of artistic talent to create something like this. Magic in this world was unstable. It varied so much that the concentration of mana where you happened to be could determine whether your magic worked or didn’t work at all. This place called the Academy of Sages seemed to have

been built on land where the mana tended to be relatively strong and stable; but even so, something incredibly elaborate must have been devised to get a doll of that complexity to function reliably. I figured there was probably some kind of mechanism that helped it to maintain stable operation, something corresponding to the escapement in a clock, but I couldn't begin to imagine how to construct something like that. I felt like the laborious study that must have been needed to get this working must have been similar to putting together an utterly enormous jigsaw puzzle, even in terms of the effort required to put appropriate Signs together in just the right way. There was no doubt that more than a couple of years had been invested in this.

"What's that? That table! What?! I can't quite tell how long it is! Wow!"

Master Hiram laughed. "Strange, isn't it?"

There were several students sitting at a table. It looked like both a long table that could seat a hundred people having lunch and a little desk that could only fit four or five people around it. What a strange sight. *This is a real world of magic*, I thought, and then Master Hiram ruined it. "That is a lecture dedicated to memorizing Words representing various objects."

Bee made a disgusted noise. "Did you do that too, Will?"

"You bet I did. You have to cram and cram that stuff, there's no other way."

I could also see a classroom where a dozen or so students were heads-down at their wax tablets toiling away at a copying exercise. It reminded me of schools from my past world. In the end, magic came down to whether you knew what specific Words referred to, so memorization and repetition were the most important fundamentals.

"That building over there is the student housing."

As far as I could tell by looking through the windows, the students had shared dorms with four to a room.

Children who were judged as having an aptitude for magic came from all over to the Academy in Whitesails to receive an education. Some went on to become teachers at the Academy, while others returned to their homes and became local conjurers. The especially talented ones were hired for positions that suited

them.

“Now that I think about it...”

How could you tell when someone had a talent for magic? I’d had Gus ever since I was young, and he’d seen talent in me and taught me, so I knew nothing about that kind of thing. Being able to see fairies was an easy sign for people like Menel, and priests received revelations in some form from their gods, so it was easy for them to tell as well. But talent in using the Words of Creation was fundamentally something that had to be fostered through hard work. Wouldn’t it be hard to discover? Curious, I asked Master Hiram this question.

“The words of children with the talent to become sorcerers have power.”

“Power?”

“Yes. Here, we use the Words of Creation, but the Common Tongue has its roots in the same place, if you trace them back. So those words too have power, although extremely weak. Recognizable signs like that naturally occur in the case of a talented child.”

“Oh, I know about that,” Bee said. “What’s a good example...?”

When a talented child who didn’t know how to control their power yet cheered for someone and really meant it, for example, the person they were cheering on could feel an unusual rush and their abilities could be amplified. Or, conversely, any truly hate-filled language they used could result in physical damage. Strange phenomena like that surrounded children with talent in using Words, so unless the child was extremely quiet, it was said to be possible to tell by the time they were about ten years old. And except in rural areas far from civilization, once a child like that was understood to have talent as a sorcerer, a nearby sorcerer would take charge of them.

“Sorcerers in different parts of the world network like that, taking new apprentices or handing them over to other sorcerers,” Bee said. “They develop them a little, and if they seem promising, send them to some academy.”

In other words, in terms of my previous world, the sorcerer apprenticeship system corresponded to primary education, and the Academy was higher education.

“Yes. Although it’s possible to determine talent to a certain extent, there are other factors, such as whether there is a family business they need to inherit, or whether or not they have the right character. So there are cases when we only teach them how to prevent their power from bursting out of control, then immediately send them home.”

“Character?”

“Often said to be most important of all, yes. Far more important than brains, determination, or enunciation.”

Correctly taking my silence as a prompt to elaborate, he continued. “It is said that the people best suited to be sorcerers are meek, easygoing, patient, and reticent. Those who are fierce by nature eventually end up using violent Words. And when someone gets used to spitting out violent Words, sooner or later, it will be their undoing. Words are dangerous things. Those of fiery temperament don’t live long lives.”

Gus had taught me plenty of those cautionary tales when I was young. There was the sorcerer who tried to reshape the nearby terrain, triggered a huge earthquake, and was swallowed up into a deep fissure. Another sorcerer periodically manipulated the weather and ended up destabilizing the area’s climate and being tormented by hunger. One sorcerer succeeded in transmogrifying himself into an animal—mental faculties and all. A sorcerer directed a powerful decomposition magic at his sworn enemy, got tongue-tied out of sheer hatred and anger, and blew himself to pieces. There was even one about a sorcerer who opened a hole to another dimension and got eaten by *something* inside.

This was probably a universally shared lesson among those who dealt with magic. The same warnings I’d heard from Gus ran deep within this institute as well.

“That all being said, letting too much poison build inside the heart is also a cause of emotional outbursts and a recipe for ruin. As with everything, it is important to strike a balance.” Master Hiram shrugged.

Bee was nodding along, impressed.

“Well, here we are.” After we’d passed between several buildings, our

footfalls stopped in front of a certain door. “The Academy library, just as you asked.”



“You have my personal authorization to browse all parts of the library except for the forbidden shelves underground.” Master Hiram gestured towards the entrance to the library, which was a large set of double doors, probably for some reason to do with how the books were brought in and out.

“Thank you so very much for entertaining my unreasonable request. Great Master of Woods, Master Hiram, skilled wielder of Words, protector of forbidden regions, you have my most heartfelt gratitude and admiration.” Pinching the hem of her coat, Bee gave an elegant bow. She wasn’t speaking in her normal bright and cheerful voice. It was the calm voice of an adult lady.

I followed her lead and bowed as well.

Master Hiram smiled. “Well then, I will be in the courtyard. Please call for me again when you finish reading.” And he left.

Still, this was pretty surprising.

“So you were looking for a book, Bee?”

“Yep, that’s what I wanted to see. Surprised? I can read!”

“Yeah, I am a bit.”

I’d been assuming that she wanted to see what it was like inside the sorcerers’ place of learning that was sung about in so many songs. The literacy rate in this world was pretty low. That was why troubadours and singers served such a useful role as the oral media. I would never have expected that a troubadour like Bee could read and had her sights on the library.

“There’s a certain book I’m looking for. Well, you’ll see, let’s just go in.” Bee opened the door with her small and chubby hands. Lit by magical light, rows of shelves stretched before us. The smell of ink tickled my nostrils.

“Do you want me to help you look?” I asked.

“Hmm... I’ll look by myself for now. Sorry, you brought me all this way, and now you might just end up being bored.”

I laughed. “I could never be bored with this much to read.” I stepped into the room as I spoke.

To my surprise, the Academy’s library was smaller than I expected—about the size of a library room in a public hall. I had a moment of confusion before a second thought changed my mind. The only reason this seemed strange was because I was comparing it to my memories of the dedicated large-scale libraries from my previous world, where printing technology was widespread and the literacy rate was extremely high. By this world’s standards, this was definitely big. It was probably the largest of its kind in Southmark.

I flipped through a few books just to have a look, and as expected, the books for beginners—textbooks teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic—were woodblock-printed, while the majority of the specialist books were handwritten copies. It was probably an issue of demand. Carving out a woodblock for printing a book was an involved process requiring multiple people. Unless you could expect the book to sell a certain amount, the sales wouldn’t be enough to recoup the costs invested.

Printing technology and literacy rate are more or less correlated. As printing technology improves, books become cheaper and more widespread, and the literacy rate rises. As the literacy rate rises, demand for books increases, and printing technology improves further. At some point, the line representing those two statistics should rise sharply, but this world probably hadn’t reached that point yet.

I flicked through a few books idly while thinking this, and then, deciding to read something myself, I picked up one that billed itself as an introduction to the history of magic. Gus’s lessons had given me a good grounding in magic, but I wanted to gain an understanding of how the theory had changed in the two centuries that Gus had no knowledge of. I sat in front of the bookrests that were probably meant for people to use while browsing and started to turn the pages.

Shortly after, Bee came back holding two old and quite large books with elaborate bindings. She groaned with the weight of them. They looked pretty heavy for her—she did have the small body of a halfling, after all. In terms of my previous world, the illuminated manuscripts of this age were like coffee table

books, with pages that were thick and not designed to be quickly flipped through.

“I’ll hold them,” I said.

“Thanks,” she grunted back.

As I helped her place the books on a couple of bookrests, I caught a glance of the titles. One was an index of the graduates of the Academy. The other was a book on local history and affairs, covering the recent history of distant regions and associated rumors.



After that, we spent a lot of time absorbed in our books, then said our thanks to Master Hiram and departed the Academy. A small path was pointed out to us for our journey back through the woods. After a short walk in a straight line, we were suddenly outside the forest. The woods’ wonderful strangeness astonished us once again.

Bee and I walked alongside each other as we headed back to Whitesails.

“Say, Bee...”

“You want to know what the books were?”

I nodded. Bee’s line of work meant that she always wanted material for songs and poems, but I couldn’t imagine that she would go to this much effort just for that. She would be better off just using her imagination to come up with a story. And anyway, if that were her goal, she wouldn’t have searched for the graduate index.

“Hmm...” Bee seemed to be taking a moment to think about what to say. She was normally cheerful and childlike, but at times like this, she had a grown-up aura about her. Then, with wistful eyes, she said quietly, “There was someone I traveled with a long time ago, when I wasn’t doing my troubadour thing yet.”

When I saw her expression, nothing felt right to say. So I just walked beside her in silence. The evening sun had started to set. Its warm light shone on the snow, making it sparkle.

“She had hair the color of old gold and clear-blue eyes like the sea. She was

very pretty. We happened to be going the same way, and we got on pretty well. I learned later that she was an incredible sorceress.”

Saying nothing, I just matched my pace with hers and watched the setting sun as the words spilled from her mouth.

“She was apparently going around visiting ruins all over in search of Signs lost to time. But she was a good person, the kind who’d make it her business to help people with their problems, whatever they were. Her name isn’t very well known, but in that region, she was often called a ‘hero.’ And that was true. She was good with a cane staff, she was sharp and witty. Golem magic was her specialty. She was amazing at it. And I started having a lot of fun with her, so I went way off-track just so we could stick together. And then we finally got to a place where we had to go our separate ways, we waved to each other and said, ‘See you again.’”

Bee had a nostalgic, faraway look in her eyes. “She died right after we split up. I heard she went down fighting, protecting a town from a big goblin raid.”

“Wow, that’s, uh—”

“Oh, don’t get the wrong idea! Her death isn’t what bothers me. Sure, it’s sad, but she must have accepted it when she decided to fight, y’know? It was her decision to make. I’d never say she shouldn’t have done it, that’s not my style. But... you know.” Her expression clouded over. “I just really don’t like the way that her courage just got forgotten about right away.” Bee explained that although the hero’s death was mourned, as people were swept along by everyday life, she was soon forgotten, with fewer and fewer people mentioning her name.

This world was dangerous. Heroes, too, were born into this world without notice and left it just as quietly. That was just how things were. But even so...

“She was exalted, thanked—and then she died, and everyone just dropped her. That’s horrible. When someone shows courage like that, you don’t just use them and throw them away.” Bee’s voice was filled with striking determination. “So I started singing. Determined to carry on her memory on through song.”

As we walked down the path lit by the setting sun, the bustle of people hurrying home drew closer.

“But once I started, I realized,” she said.

“Realized what?”

“Stories about heroes—they hold hope.”

There’s someone out there with outstanding strength and magical power trying to save people. Someone’s fighting. Has been fighting.

“For everyone else, you know, that gives them... quite a lot of hope. Hearing that someone’s out there. Like the Three Heroes you love. Or like you, now.” She smiled at me. “Look.” She pointed. The first star of the evening was shining in the sky. “That star that’s the very first to shine, before the darkness of night falls. That’s a hero.”

She looked back at me. “Like when Menel started acting super motivated, or when Reystov kinda decided to start sticking around you—when you walk, people follow. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Yeah.” I nodded with a smile. After all, she was right. Even now, I was still following. Still following the three who had come before me. And if there were people out there following me, that had to mean that the three lives that had cast light on me hadn’t done so for nothing.

“That’s why I sing. To show people the shining stars.” Bee dashed a few steps ahead and spun around, showing me a beautiful, beaming smile. I couldn’t help but smile back.

Then, she let out a high-pitched sigh of relief. “That’s enough about me! Hmm, all that talking about heroes has made me want to sing!”

“Why don’t we go somewhere you can do that, then?”

“Good idea, very good idea! Why don’t we make a bit of cash? Okay, while I have you, you can help me keep the crowd interested and be in charge of picking up the tips!”

“You’re on.”

I doubted that Bee would stick around here with me. Her creed, to seek and spread tales, didn’t see staying in one place as a good thing. But I was sure that if she did leave, someday, she would return.

“When you finish your song about that sorceress, let me hear it.”

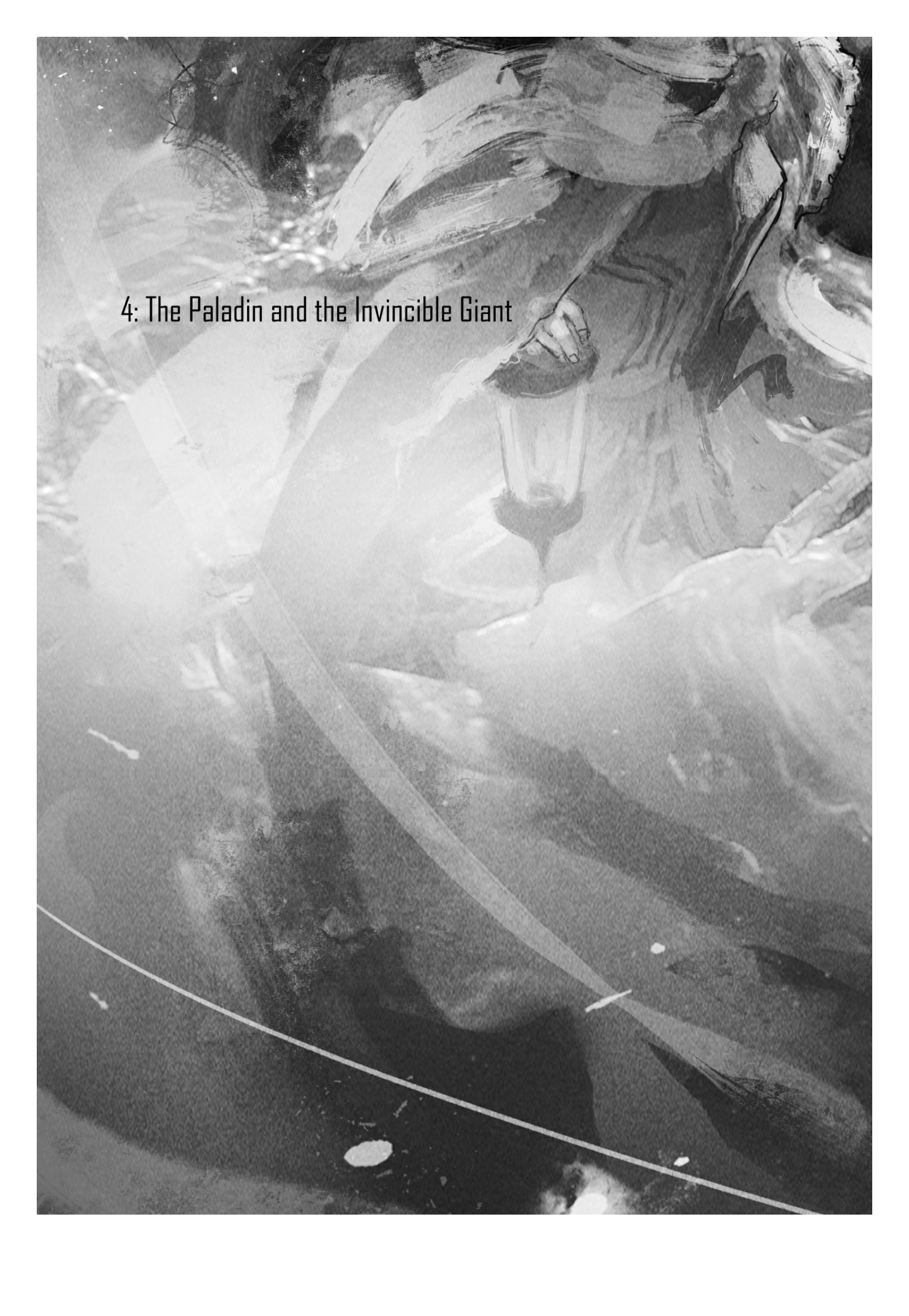
Bee nodded. “Sure, I’ll play it for you. I’ve got all the information I need now!”

And I was sure that if I fell in battle somewhere someday—

“Making the Paladin pick up my coins! Yep, I’m living the high life!”

Laughing together, we headed for the city square.



A dark, atmospheric illustration in a painterly style. A large, muscular hand emerges from the shadows, holding a glowing lantern. The scene is dimly lit, with the lantern providing the primary light source, casting long, dramatic shadows. The background is filled with swirling, ethereal patterns and textures, suggesting a vast, ancient, or perhaps subterranean environment. The overall mood is mysterious and epic.

4: The Paladin and the Invincible Giant

He was no ordinary opponent.

“Diiiiiiiiiiiie!”

An enraged, husky yell that seemed to thunder from the ground itself accompanied the massive club swinging towards me. Actually, could it even be called a club? It was *literally the trunk of a tree*, wide enough that I probably couldn't wrap my arms all the way around it, and being swung with such terrible force that it bent. Although the trunk had at least been hastily stripped of its branches, it was not something that a living creature should have been swinging around. If it hit me, death was all but certain!

I ducked under the sideways swipe and leapt forward, quickly closing the distance to my opponent. My target was his ankles. Yelling out a battle cry, I slashed the newly remade Calldawn at his enormous ankles. The glaive's golden blade traced a trail through space, and then—

My attack *disappeared*.

At some point, my blade had stopped. I felt my blood run cold. I had swung the glaive as if driving an axe into a huge tree, with all the explosive energy my body could muster. And yet now the blade was stationary, as if all its momentum had been sucked into a mysterious void. He hadn't blocked it, deflected it, or avoided it. The motion vector of my attack had suddenly disappeared. That was the only way to describe it. The blade's motion had been inexplicably arrested. *It had happened again*. Each time I tried to attack this opponent, this strange phenomenon occurred.

With a lengthy, furious roar, a foot came stomping down from overhead. I leapt backwards to dodge it and regained a safe distance.

The one roaring was a giant. Even Gangr, the forest giant I had met previously who was over three meters tall, looked small by comparison. I couldn't even tell how big he was by looking up at him, he threw off my sense of scale so badly. If a hill in a place that didn't get much sunlight suddenly rose up, came over to me, and looked down on me, I imagined it might look something like this. His skin was like rock, and covered in moss so thick it reminded me of fur. A large, plump nose and piercing eyes peeked out from among the moss. His thick arms reminded me of a great and ancient tree. His sturdy legs stood like enormous

boulders.

I couldn't keep on looking. I weaved through the attacks from his wildly swinging club, leapt in close again, and with a forceful yell, I thrust my glaive towards his Achilles' tendon. Then, flipping the weapon around, I delivered a powerful jab with the end of the shaft. But again, neither attack worked. The giant lifted his foot to stamp on me as I hung about his legs a little too long—

“Menel!”

“Salamander, scorch him!” Menel, who had secured a safe spot behind a rock a little distance away, loudly incanted a fire spell. Flame stretched from a lantern that he had tossed onto the ground, making a beeline for the giant's face.

It was a direct hit. A burst of flames like a red flower in bloom unfolded inside my imagination. But not even that came to pass. The flame slowed to a gentle stop and fizzled out.

But anyone would be thrown off if fire breath rushed towards their face, and the giant's foot had been raised in the air as it happened. He made three increasingly desperate noises as he lost his balance, then fell to the ground with a heavy thud that shook the earth and threw a cloud of dust into the air. By the time I heard him groaning—perhaps the fall had hurt at least—I had already retreated to a great distance.

But as the giant held his face, he began to stand.

“Feck it, I knew it wouldn't work!”

His face didn't have a single burn mark. It seemed he'd fallen over not because he'd taken any damage, but simply because the flames directly in his face had been so bright he'd lurched back in surprise.

Intending to prevent the giant from getting to his feet, Menel unleashed further attacks. Wind Cutter, Stone Fist, and other techniques of various types aimed at a good spread of areas across the giant's body—his knees, belly, neck, face, and more—but the outcome was the same every time. The spells were on-target, but they were inexplicably arrested and had no effect.

Blades didn't work. If even Calldawn was no good, the caliber of the

demonblade or enchanted sword definitely wasn't the problem.

Elementalist spells were no good either. Menel understood the situation as well as I did. It looked like he had been using a wide range of techniques, from the classic fire, air, and earth attacks to lesser-used mental attacks that employed fae of fear and confusion. However, none had any effect.

In that case—I breathed in deeply and pressed my feet firmly into the ground—what about magic?!

“Tonitrus!”

A raucous sound rang out like the boom of a cannon, or perhaps the deafening echo of a cracked bell struck as hard as possible, and a burning smell filled the air as a bolt of purple lightning tore the sky between me and the chest of the giant.



“Are you for real...?”

I could hear Menel's dumbfounded voice. I felt the same way. Even the lightning of the *Tonitrus* attack had inexplicably stopped just before striking the giant's chest.

Blades wouldn't work, nor elementalist spells, nor magic. None of the methods of attack I had at my disposal did anything against this opponent.

As if by way of counterattack, the club came swinging my way as the giant belted out a long roar. Put under pressure, I hurriedly leapt backwards. The end of the club missed me. However, there was rocky ground everywhere. When the giant flicked up the club he had just smashed down, innumerable chunks and fragments of rock flew in my direction as though a bomb had gone off.

“Flame, protect me!”

Sacred Shield barely made it in time. The shining shield manifested in midair and repelled the rocks flying at me. The attacks were coming thick and fast, and taking a single hit would certainly mean suffering serious damage. This fight was a huge drain on my nerves and physical energy. My breath was heavy, and my body was hot and covered in sweat. I hoped to find a way to break through this

situation somehow. Unfortunately...

“O great giant! Surely this is enough?! Please, talk with—”

“Begoooooone!”

From the moment we met, my attempts at conversation had been met with this kind of physical response. Despite telling me to leave, his attacks were outright lethal. I had no choice but to resort to dodging and fighting back, but not a single attack worked against him. We were currently at a total stalemate, neither of us able to deal the other a telling blow. What on earth was I supposed to do? I could think of a few possibilities to get around the fact that my attacks weren't working, but was it right to carry those out? Considering the circumstances surrounding this giant, retreating would probably be the more correct decision. But finding a smart way to retreat in this situation would be difficult in itself—

I gave some thought to those things in the middle of battle. And the moment I did, the rock I had one foot on tilted severely as I tried to place pressure on it.

Oh—

I broke out in a cold sweat that covered my entire back. My ankle twisted in a strange direction. My momentum was unstoppable. I fell forward.

Oh God.

I've botched it.

This is that kind of horrific blunder.

The kind that after it happens, it's already too late.

My vision went gray. Everything appeared to be moving in slow motion. In front of me, I could see that enormous club, swinging sideways towards me, closing in on me slowly, as though the world was advancing frame by frame. The moment of collision arrived. As a violent impact shook me, the color returned to the world, and time's flow returned to normal.



I soared through the air. I had been sent flying. I could feel my organs all shifting to one side. Somewhere far away, I heard Menel scream. Below me was rocky ground—a steep decline—I rolled and fell—

Ow. Ow. Ow.

Thud. My head hit something. My eyes filled with tears. My body bounced like a cartoon. I fell. Through my blurry vision, far above, I saw the giant's face looking down at me...

.....

.....

...

And just like that... I was defeated.



“The town doesn’t have enough copper coins.”

A few days earlier, in Torch Port, I had gone shopping for new shoes and various other items to replace the things that had been used up in the endless beast hunts that followed the slaying of the foul-dragon Valacirca. The one talking to me with a frown on his face was Tonio.

“Given how rapidly the town is expanding, it was always an issue that we were going to need to address. But now that the foul-dragon has been successfully slain, people’s minds are at ease, and trade and commerce is flourishing, well...”

“Ahh... I guess that sort of thing *would* come up.” Now I was frowning, too. “And we’re starting to see symptoms?”

“We are, yes.”

In my last world, where the creation and circulation of currency was sufficiently advanced, the problem of not having enough physical objects to represent money only came up on a national scale in the context of debating macroeconomics. But in this world, it was a more familiar and common issue.

There still wasn’t very much travel or trade between communities. The

settlements scattered all around were like little isolated worlds of their own, and there were few enough coins within any single one that with enough effort it would be possible to count them. However, there were enough in circulation that they could be used within the villages for trades between the people living there. Coins left the system when the villagers went to town and bought farming tools and livestock, and entered it when the villagers went to sell crops. Of course, if those two sides fell out of balance, a currency shortage could easily occur.

Torch Port had seen a rise in both internal and external trade recently as its population rapidly increased, and though the scale of things here was a little different from the villages, the same situation applied.

A shortage of currency, which facilitates trade, would cause complicated problems in all kinds of places. What would happen if an entire village had a shortage of copper coins, for example? To express it in my previous world's terms, this would be a society in which there was a severe reduction in the number of 100-yen and 10-yen coins, there were still plenty of larger-value notes circulating, and one couldn't easily be exchanged for the other. What would happen if you tried to trade for a product with a fractional price in a society like that?

Starting with the obvious, once everyone started to run out of coins, they would become reluctant to use them. Buyers wouldn't want to use their coins if they could help it, because those coins were used everywhere for all kinds of low-value payments, and if a buyer ran out of them, it would cause them problems whenever they tried to trade. Similarly, if sellers handed out change to all and sundry, their change would dry up in no time, and they would be put in a tight spot for future transactions. So they too wouldn't want to hand over their coins.

Stalls wouldn't want to be paid in large notes and would ask the buyers to pay with coins, while their customers would want to pay with notes and receive coins as change. The result of both parties seeking the optimal solution as seen from their own viewpoints would be a deadlock. This would not be a recipe for smooth and amicable transactions. It would cause arguments all over, and I could imagine it resulting in something like a stop on trading. It could still get

worse from there, leading to all kinds of issues: counterfeit money starting to spread, the villages returning to a bartering system...

Just as a human being becomes unwell if they lose too much blood, the loss of money, which facilitates trade between different things, would eat away at the healthy operation of the economy.

That was the core of the “lack of copper coins” problem. And now I had to think about how to resolve it.

“I guess we can’t expect a shortage of coppers to resolve itself naturally.”

“Oh? So you know about this, Will.”

“My grandfather taught me.”

The story might have been different for gold or silver coins, but it would be difficult to hope for a natural resolution to a shortage of coppers. The reason was simple.

Again by comparison to the money of my previous world, let’s say, for example, that there was a terrible shortage of 10,000-yen notes in a certain region, and you could exchange one of them there for *eleven* 1,000-yen notes. Would there be someone in another region, where there was a sufficient supply of 10,000-yen notes, who would think: “I will collect a good number of 10,000-yen notes—say a thousand of them, ten million yen’s worth—send them over, and make a million yen in profit”? There almost certainly would. And so the imbalance would be naturally resolved.

But what if, similarly, there was a terrible shortage of 10-yen coins in a certain region, and you could exchange a thousand of them there for eleven 1,000-yen notes? Would there be someone in another region, where there was a sufficient supply of 10-yen coins, who would think: “I will collect a million of these coins, count them all up, send this massive amount of coins over, which will probably weigh about half a ton including the containers, and make a million yen in profit”? And let’s add to this that vehicles with internal combustion engines like cars and motorbikes simply don’t exist.

No, they probably wouldn’t even consider it. It would be too much of a hassle. After factoring in the time it would take and the amount it would cost to collect,

count, transport, and secure all that money, it wouldn't be worth the million-yen return. Low-denomination currency is heavy and not worth much, and the copper coins of this world were no different. Nothing was less suited to sending across regions and making a profit from the difference in price.

So shortages of low-denomination currency wouldn't naturally resolve themselves. Gus had talked about this during his economics lectures, seemingly with great relish. What could be done, then?

"Let's see..." I thought for a moment. "Alright, I'm just asking, but it wouldn't be possible for you to issue something like small-change notes from your store..."

"That would be difficult. I am not sufficiently trusted."

That was one possible solution: handing out promissory notes made of paper or wood with "however-many coppers" written on them and using them as local currency. In other words, making something that was like the first step towards a banknote. However, this required a lot of trust and assets.

"Then, buy coppers in bulk in Whitesails?"

That was another quick fix option: pay money to get money.

"That would be a reliable method, certainly. However, as I am sure you are aware, Whitesails itself suffers from a slight but chronic shortage of copper coins as well. Making a large purchase of them—"

"Could lead to negative effects on Whitesails, too? I don't think it would be *that* bad."

"Not 'that bad,' no. Nevertheless, the influential figures of Whitesails may not look upon you too kindly for it."

I had to give him that. Whitesails was a relatively new city, created for the purpose of developing the south, and prospering under the governance of His Excellency, brother to the king. The fact that it was prospering meant that the scale of its economy was growing, and that brought with it an increase in trade and the amount of currency changing hands. There were probably some people of status struggling to manage the amount of currency in circulation. They couldn't simply ask the Fertile Kingdom mints on the mainland across the sea to

increase the supply of copper coins. It wouldn't be that easy. In this age, copper coins weren't something you could just churn out like that.

First of all, making a lot of copper coins would require a large amount of the raw resource—that is, copper—and if you purchased too much at once, it would cause a shortage in the amount of copper available for everyday necessities, and the copper price would rise. Then what would happen is that copper coins would become many times cheaper than copper itself, which would mean that if someone secretly melted the copper coins down and made them into copper ingots, they would make a lot of money. At that point, no matter how many more copper coins you made, they would be melted down in secret, even if you enacted a law prohibiting it. Every time you minted the coins from the raw resources, they would be melted back down again. It would be a catastrophe. The face value of the copper coins and their value as raw metal couldn't be allowed to change places.

Organizing monetary policy on a macro scale was a pretty mentally challenging job in my previous world, and it was no different here. If I wandered into the midst of the people putting serious thought into all that and started making very inconsiderate large purchases of copper coins, yeah, I could imagine they wouldn't think much of me. Tonio was very shrewd.

“But then what else is there?”

We couldn't possibly mint new coppers ourselves. Firstly, the private minting and counterfeiting of currency was prohibited by law, and anyway, making currency was quite expensive. After considering the cost of acquiring the raw resources, the labor cost of the workers who would make the coins, and the cost of the facility itself among other things, by some estimates, it would never be profitable to mint copper coins instead of silver or gold.

“That is the crux of the matter,” Tonio said. “If we go about this cleverly, we might be able to scratch the back of the people in Whitesails a little.”

Now he'd caught my interest. That sounded pretty tempting. I unconsciously leaned in. Tonio grinned at me.

“You must have an inkling, Will.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Of a place where we could acquire a veritable *mountain* of copper coins.”

“Ohh.”

I did indeed.



Just like many areas in my previous world’s history, in the regions along the coast of Middle-sea between Grassland and Southmark, a pretty diverse array of coins were in circulation, even including privately minted ones. It was a kind of mixed-currency system. Among these various currencies, the well-made coins with high precious-metal content were particularly highly trusted.

So what was the highest-quality and most-trusted currency in this area? Was it the money minted by the Fertile Kingdom? The high-quality coins from the lands of the dwarves? Or was it the money of some more distant power? Actually, it was none of them. The most trusted money along the coast of Middle-sea was the coins used during the much more stable period of the Union Age two hundred years ago. They were intricately made with high precious-metal content and could be found in ruins all over. The government that had created them was now defunct, so there was no danger of them being minted in large quantities or the composition being tampered with. For all these reasons, they were the “key currency” in regions near Middle-sea at present.

“You’re right.” I gave a single nod. “*There were copper coins in the foul-dragon’s mountain of treasure.*”

I remembered fishing around a bit in that mountain of treasure after the battle with Valacirca to replace my mostly destroyed clothes and armor. In keeping with the nature of treasure-hoarding dragons, Valacirca had amassed a large number of copper coins. It didn’t seem as though he’d treated them with any particular care, however. Countless numbers of them were just scattered randomly about the bottom of the pile with an attitude like, “Well, I do own them, and they’re my treasure, so I guess I won’t bother to throw them away.” Of course, the majority of them were copper coins from the Union Age or slightly before.

“The problem is how to split the treasure up.”

“If it’s to be used as a bargaining chip with His Excellency?”

“Exactly.”

The law of monster-hunting in this world was for all the spoils of battle, including the corpse, to go to the victor. However, since all five of us who took on the foul-dragon had claim to the treasure, I couldn’t use the entire vast hoard however I wanted. What’s more, the treasure hoard also contained a lot of relics from the Iron Country, so I had to consider its former people, too. Honestly, we’d all been putting this issue on hold. We were very busy, and everyone anticipated that it would be annoyingly complicated to distribute.

Tonio went through the steps in a soft tone. “Firstly, we negotiate for special arrangements to be made regarding the revival of the Iron Country and Lothdor, conditional on the sale to His Excellency Ethelbald of a fixed number of copper coins at a low wholesale price. If that is the purpose for which the foul-dragon’s treasure is being organized, it will at least be easy to persuade everyone.”

He continued, his speech measured and fluid. “Then, I will send trustworthy people to the mountain, safely and quickly store away the foul-dragon’s corpse and treasure hoard, and have its value estimated. There’s quite a large amount of it, yes? There will probably be items that can’t be broken up or ones whose value is completely unknown. There is the danger of theft, too. It will take quite a lot of effort to find trustworthy appraisers and guards, to store and, of course, transport it all, but I believe it will be worth the effort.”

“I see.” I nodded. “So how much do I have to pay you?” I said with a wry smile.

There was a short silence from Tonio. Then he laughed nervously.

“Nothing gets by the Paladin, does it?”

“My grandfather taught me well.”

We smiled silently at each other.

Tonio was my friend, but first and foremost he was an independent merchant. Once he learned of the existence of a treasure hoard belonging to a dragon that had lived since the age of the gods, he obviously went about trying to find a way

he could profit from it. And it wasn't difficult for Tonio to profit here.

The mountain of treasure that Valacirca had left behind was truly enormous. It wasn't as simple as slaying the dragon, getting the treasure, and all being good. There were a large number of magical items that could become a source of trouble and would have to be properly categorized, sorted, valued, and stored. The amount of treasure was ridiculous. It would take a serious amount of effort just to move it all. And neither I nor anyone who traveled with me had the technology or workforce to categorize, sort, value, store, and appropriately handle the mountain of treasure that the foul-dragon had been hoarding.

We couldn't possibly manage that much treasure. The only one of us who could would be Al, who was in a position to give orders to the dwarves, the former owners of the Iron Country. However, he was still inexperienced, and I couldn't say that he had enough people for the job.

There was plenty of opportunity for a shrewd merchant to take advantage of here in the name of "helping." With a smile, he would offer to help me out as a friend, and take profit from the treasure for a range of expenses. It was a very clever way of going about things, I thought, but what impressed me most of all was something else.

"It's so like you to come up with something where no one loses out."

Tonio looked astonished. "I am quite clearly trying to take a sizeable portion of the treasure you own..."

"I don't intend to look down on the way you deal with money or business. Besides, a fortune that I can't handle and don't even know how much I have isn't what I'd call a fortune."

It would be impossible for me to manage what would be at least a fifth of that mountain all by myself. I would have to give the job of managing it to *someone* anyway. And it was only natural to pay money when asking someone to do something for you.

"I get someone to manage the treasure. Win for me. In exchange for going to all the effort to manage the treasure, you get continuous profit. Win for you. Because more people and dwarves will be going in and out of the Iron Mountains to organize the dragon's treasure, work will start on improving the

living conditions there and making sure there's a safe route to and fro, so for Al and the others who aim to see it revived, that's also a win. Lothdor will likely be one of the routes, so they'll gain from this, too. You'll probably hire a lot of people for all kinds of miscellaneous tasks, which creates jobs, so the townspeople and any new settlers also benefit. And I expect you're thinking about using the foul-dragon's silver and copper coins to pay their wages as well."

And then a sufficient number of silver and copper coins would make their way around Torch Port and the surrounding areas from the work being done at the Iron Mountains. The area around here would prosper, and we could help solve the currency shortage.

On a quick lookover, I couldn't see anyone who lost out with this plan. He'd brought this up casually, but thinking about how well everything fit together and knowing Tonio's personality, he'd probably put a lot of thought into this.

"You've planned this out well," I said. "Thank you very much."

Now that he had described it to me, I could form a picture in my head of how it would all fit together, but I wouldn't have been able to come up with it myself, and I wouldn't be able to actually carry it out. I didn't have the necessary contacts or the detailed business knowledge. I was a warrior, priest, and sorcerer. Although I understood money in a broad sense, having learned from Gus, I was by no means a professional merchant. I couldn't negotiate the world of business alone.

In that case, would it be an easy task for Tonio, a merchant by trade? Probably not. He was still an up-and-coming merchant in an up-and-coming town. He was building people, resources, and trust, but nothing was fully there yet.

"I think it will be a huge undertaking, and I also think the foul-dragon's treasure has the power to send people mad," I said. "There might be a lot of temptations, and there might be times when you draw hatred you don't deserve."

We had risked our lives to defeat the dragon, and I was sure that managing his treasure was going to come with many burdens as well. Not all battles

involved taking on a dragon with a weapon in hand. Running a business dealing with money was a battle, too. If you messed it up, a lot of people would die by the roadside. Instead of suffering death by a sword, they would lose their jobs, pride, and dignity, and either turn to crime out of hunger or die of despair. If taking on an evil dragon about to awaken was a battle that took courage, then spending every day creating jobs for others, making lots of trades, and trying to get money into circulation was a battle that took a lot of courage as well. At the very least, it was no different in the way that he could save a lot of people if he pulled it off.

So I placed my hand on the left side of my chest, looked straight at him, and said, “I can trust you, Tonio. Can I feel safe in the knowledge that you’ve got my back?”

Tonio didn’t say anything for a while. His eyes fixed on mine. We looked at each other quietly.

Finally, he placed his own hand on the left side of his chest, and said solemnly, “I swear by Gracefeel, god of the flame and your protector, and by Whirl, god of wind and business—I do indeed have your back. Please leave this to me.”

He offered me his hand, and I shook it. We had a deal.



After our discussion of the dragon’s treasure hoard wrapped up, I found myself with another item added to my to-do list: finding a path to the Iron Mountains. Of course, there was always the same route as before, the one that passed through Lothdor via my home, the City of the Dead. However, that route ran through regions that really were at the very outskirts of Southmark’s development and was fraught with danger. Not only that, it was quite a long and roundabout way of getting there starting from Whitesails.

It would probably be far better, especially for the future transportation of the copper coins, if I could rediscover the path that must once have connected the Iron Mountains to the northern coast, where Whitesails was. The trade routes through Middle-sea were important during the Union Age as well, so I couldn’t imagine that there was no path at all. I started thinking about searching for it when I had some time. And that was when...

“An invincible... giant?”

...I heard the rumor.

“Uh-huh. It’s just what I heard, but yeah, *he’s out there...*”

“G-Glen! You can’t speak like that to our liege...”

“What, you want me to start kissing his butt now? That’d just be awkward.”

“Yeah, it’s okay, Glen. You too, Alex, you can relax. It’s not like anyone’s listening.”

On a Torch Port street by the river where several piers jutted out side by side and the winter wind blew through, I happened to meet Glen and Alex, the adventurers to whom I had previously entrusted the dagger that was the shortened Pale Moon.

Both of them seemed to be picking up enough requests to survive okay. Their equipment had gotten a little better recently, too. Glen, the black-haired boy who’d been dressed in hemp and had a crude club and bow as weapons, was now wearing leather armor, and instead of his club he had a tough-looking mace. The ginger kid called Alex, who I assumed to be male but wasn’t going to ask, still had his ash wand and dark-colored robe, but it looked like he was wearing some light chain mail underneath the robe now.

It was good that they weren’t neglecting their armor. They’d also chosen well-made rucksacks and belt pouches. They deserved top marks for that, too. But most important to me was that Glen still had the Pale Moon dagger at his waist. Seeing that warmed my heart a little. Pale Moon was still out there on its journey, being of use to someone.

“Near Beast Woods, in the northeast bit of the Rust Mountains—uh, are they the Iron Mountains now that you freed them from the dragon? Anyway, there’s a village near there, and like, they’re up shit creek. The water from the river’s bad, and there’s a pissed-off giant who’s decided the clean-water spring nearby is his turf now.”

“Umm, and there were several strong adventurers who heard the rumors and tried their hand at it, but they were all beaten.”

“And that’s the Invincible Giant?”

Glen and Alex nodded as one.

“It’s just talk, so beats me if it’s true, but they were saying stuff like, he’s invincible, stinking huge, freaking scary, someone go fight him, whoever beats him’s getting a medal, that kind of stuff.”

“We heard the same story in adventurer taverns all over. At first we thought it was just the drunks making up nonsense, but there were also some sober people...”

“Huh...” I thought for a bit. Rumors were a big source of information in this world, but that meant that misinformation got mixed in from time to time. Just like in my previous world, false rumors spread relatively easily. For example, someone could see a place that looked creepy and crack a joke, saying, “That place looks like it’d have a demon lurking in it.” Then someone would hear that and say, “There might be a demon lurking in there.” And before you knew it, it would be, “I heard there’s a demon lurking in there,” and a nonexistent demon threat would be created. That kind of thing happened a lot.

And even without calling on that kind of coincidence, there were always those troubled people who would tell huge lies with a knowing smirk out of a desire for attention, to put themselves in the limelight and satisfy their need for social approval.

So I wasn’t going to immediately take the claims of a giant at face value—but I’d only just been thinking about how I wanted to investigate the route to the Iron Mountains anyway.

“I think I’ll go and check it out,” I said.

“No kidding. First a dragon, now a giant? You’re a madman...”

“There might be people who need help, and I have business over there anyway. I’ll at least go to see whether he’s there or not.” I thanked them for the information, asked them to tell me if they heard anything more, and gave them a few silver and copper coins.

“W-We can’t take this much...” Alex tried to politely turn me down.

But I insisted. “It’s your info fee. It’s good for an adventurer to be a little profit-greedy. Put it toward something.”

After showing a little hesitation, he nodded and took them from me. “Alright. A little profit-greedy... I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Okay, I’ll be going now. Oh, Glen, how’s the dagger? Does it feel good to use?”

“I had a beast on top of me one time, and it was looking pretty bad. I just managed to bury this guy into him. Saved me. Thanks for the good dagger, bud.” Glen grinned.

I grinned back and gave his shoulder a friendly bump with my fist.



The air there was very cold, perhaps because of the wind blowing down from the Iron Mountains. The ground in the area didn’t look to be very fertile, either. Under a slightly cloudy sky, the crops grew low to the ground, lying flat like a person crawling. Winter wheat and root vegetables like turnips and carrots were planted there. They were extremely ordinary produce, but they looked a little lifeless and shriveled. The climate had to be the cause. That, and...

“Urgh. That is gross.”

Menel gave a huge frown when he saw the river. The water was a reddish-brown color. It wasn’t that the rain had washed earth and sand downstream, temporarily polluting the river, or that there were just a lot of red rocks on the riverbed in the first place. It was something more.

I squatted down next to the river and sniffed the water. It smelled of rust. I licked a drop of it. The taste was a little bitter and astringent. “It looks like the river’s flowing down from the Iron Mountains, so I guess the underground water vein that the spring’s linked up to must be passing through an iron deposit.”

The iron content of the water had combined with the oxygen in the air and turned the water red. If it was just that there was a little more iron in the water than there should be, that wouldn’t be too terrible. But it was possible that it also contained other components of mineral origin. That was a scary thought.

Given that there were people living here, it probably wasn't toxic to the point that drinking a bit of it would immediately do anything to you, but at the very least, it was bitter and a disgusting color, and wasn't pleasant to drink.

We went quiet for a period as we walked along the path by the river, looking at the nearby fields.

"Heyyyy!" Working in a field a little way off was a farmer wearing a thin towel around his head and tied under his chin. Noticing the two of us, he called out, dragging out his voice so it would carry. "Who are you two?! Adventurers?!"

I took a deep breath. "Yes!" I yelled back, stretching my words in the same way. "Pretty much! How are the fields?!"

"Well, so-so, you know!"

"Is the head of your village here?!"

"Sure! Follow the road, it's the house at the top of the hill!"

"Thank you for your help!"

"How's the city?! Any news?!"

"The mountain dragon was slain! The winter solstice festival will be a big party!"

"Oh, so it's true! That's a relief! Great news!"

Then we waved goodbye from afar and parted ways.

"You've gotten pretty used to this," Menel said. "You used to be like some sheltered kid who'd never set foot in the real world."

"It *has* been three years."

We chatted like that for a while as we continued along the footpath towards the village houses, giving our greetings to the farmers we met along the way working in the fields. All of a sudden, I heard loud laughter.

"Hey, we have visitors! Welcome!"

I saw someone who looked to be the village chief come out of a house on top of a hill, probably after hearing our voices. It was a lively young woman. The sheath of the dagger she was wearing had a crest on it, so she had to be...

nobility?!



“Wahahah! Never expected the noble Faraway Paladin’s party! Well, get it down you! I’ll warn you now, though, it tastes like crap!”

“Urgh, you weren’t kidding!” Menel said.

The woman cackled. “Straight to my face, huh? The beautiful Swift Wings of elven blood, they said. I thought, that guy sounds like a piss-elegant, stuck-up asshole. But hey, you ain’t bad!”

“That’s those stories for you. All of them are like that, big talk, big fat lies. Nothing stays small with those guys! Their stories swell faster than a pervert’s pants.”

“Whoa whoa whoa! Do you really have elf blood? Where’d your elegance go?!”

“Ya, ya, and what about you? Where’s *your* gracefulness?” Menel screwed up his face. “Gods, this ale tastes like piss! This is what passes for booze around here?! Fig, you’ve got it bad!”

“Right?! Nothing’s worse than shitty booze. Puts a real damper on your mood!”

“Should’ve brought some myself! Tell you what, here’s a gift. Go on, take it!”

“What’s—Oh, salt! Nice!”

The pace of their verbal catchball was frenetic. I sat there speechless, unable to believe this was a conversation that was taking place between a pretty-faced half-elf and a noble-blooded woman. Just as Menel said, I probably was a bit sheltered when it came to things like this. The two of them picked away at their porridge, a mix of wheat and various kinds of wild grass boiled to a pulp (in water from the river, so it was a little red and smelled strange), and knocked back ale while making crude jokes and laughing loudly.

The village chief had introduced herself as Carmela Faraqa, saying, “Technically I’m a baroness, but it’s not like that counts for squat. Don’t go calling me Lady Faraqa!” And then she’d given a boisterous laugh.

Carmela had—I didn't really like saying this kind of thing about a woman, but you could tell even through her farm clothes that she had a well-shaped body. When I say "well-shaped," I don't mean that she had a big butt or an hourglass figure or anything like that, simply that she had a good physique and muscle. In terms of age, I put her in her mid-twenties. Her hair and eyes were quite dark. While she did have a feminine facial structure, she also had thick, prominent eyebrows, and I thought that if she disguised herself as a man, she could probably pass as some famous warrior. The way she spoke, too, was terribly rough. I wouldn't have recognized it as a woman's voice except that it was a little bit too high for a man's.

"A baroness? Then, Carmela, you must be..."

"Yup. Here to 'take back our land,' or whatever."

In the pandemonium caused by the High King of the demons two hundred years ago, Southmark suffered catastrophic damage, civilization disappeared almost completely, and people fled to the northern continent of Grassland. But because Grassland was also in great chaos, reconquering Southmark was impossible. Trees swallowed what was left of the towns and cities, rivers changed their course, and the continent became infested with all kinds of threats. And so Southmark became a place at the farthest reaches of the world where mankind dared not tread.

And then, just a few decades ago, the Fertile Kingdom, having unified the southwestern part of Grassland, embarked on the colonization of Southmark under the direction of the king at the time. The Fertile Kingdom, named as the successor of a kingdom of the same name that originally existed during the Union Age—although whether that was actually true was a little questionable—also had the noble cause of restoring its old territory. And there was a certain group that gave this the final push.

"Back in the Union Age, my ancestors apparently had land around here in the old Fertile Kingdom."

That group consisted of nobles like Carmela who once owned rights to land in Southmark. Those aristocrats powerful enough two hundred years ago to own territory across both continents of Grassland and Southmark kept that clout

when Southmark fell. Even some of the families who only owned land in Southmark—for instance, those who managed to flee to the north or who still had a surviving holder of succession rights in the north—were able to take advantage of their education and bloodline to serve in the royal courts of various countries as nobles of the robe.

Of course, there were lineages that went extinct or fell into decline. But some noble families joined by marriage, and that coordination was a force not to be underestimated. A good number of bloodlines survived in some form or another by helping each other out. Recovering their former territory became a desire that spanned generations, and it was their financial investment that drove the Fertile Kingdom's reconquest and recolonization of Southmark.

“Course, you can tell by taking a look at this village that House Faraqa's poor as all get-out. We just owned a few lousy bits of land in the south, where you couldn't even grow much. Even in the north, we're flicking abacuses, keeping accounts, and sucking up to everyone for chicken feed. When the expansion into Southmark got started, they scratched together some cash and sent over a few feisty-looking guys, including one tomboy who liked the martial arts. Yeah, I might be here to 'take back our land,' but I'm like the last hair on the dog's tail as far as that goes.”

Just as Carmela had said, everyone's situation was different. There were some rich houses who were raring to go, the prime example being royal houses who had absorbed several older families from the south and held rights to a lot of land on the coast of Southmark. Their plan was to join up with powerful companies, pour in tons of cash, expand and develop, and eventually get a return on their investment. And then there were families like Carmela's, who scraped together what money they could and sent someone in because there was nothing to lose. However, in the latter case—the families without a lot of funds or power—the goal wasn't to profit from the colonization effort.

“Let me guess. You got sent here to stake your family's claim to the land?”

“Bingo.”

It was out of fear that the land that on paper they were supposed to own would, in practice, become controlled by some other pioneers—probably

backed by the more wealthy aristocrats.

Once that land fell under someone else's control, no amount of arguing about their two-hundred-year-old rights to it would help them get it back. They were too weak. In fact, if the land was taken by powerful and wealthy aristocrats, even the "on paper" rights might be stolen from them by some complicated trickery. Even the little status they currently had as nobility would be on shaky ground.

The situation reminded me of the conflicts over land or estates that could give a family great political power in the history of my past life. And it was the nature of people in this age, in this world, that if the existence of their family line was threatened, they would go to some lengths to fight back. They would gather together whatever supplies they could or look for some patron, then just get some people together and send them in. There were quite a few unstable settlements that had been built under such circumstances in the northern part of Southmark.

Incidentally, I had asked His Excellency Ethel and Bishop Bagley about this kind of thing a long time ago, and they had told me that in Beast Woods and the places farther south, landowners—like Carmela—were virtually unheard of. That far south, entire families had been wiped out by the effects of the chaos two centuries ago, with very few surviving; on top of that, it was so difficult to develop here that there was almost no advantage to asserting any rights over the land.

Anyway, the general point was clear to me: Carmela Faraqa's village was a relatively common type of reclamation settlement in Southmark.

"It's unusual to send over a daughter, though."

"Nah, it wasn't like that. I had an older brother who came with me. He's gone now." Carmela's expression clouded over.

Oh. He... passed away...? I swallowed unconsciously.

"The dude couldn't hack it here and ran off to the north! What a wimp!"

I was speechless. Menel busted a gut laughing.



“He runs off and his little sis stays behind? Show some guts, big bro!”

“You said it! Nobles set an example! You gotta take it on the chin! Laugh it off!”

This Carmela had... an incredibly strong character.

“My bro was definitely missing something between his legs—”

“Nothing but his dingus down there, and a fat lot of use that was!”

They both howled with laughter. By now, Menel was in tears and could hardly breathe. It seemed as though he’d really taken to this Carmela’s brashness.

“You’re from the capital... uh... Ilia’s Tear, aren’t you? What kind of life did you have, woman?! How the feck are you nobility?!”

She put on a mocking tone. “Unruly girl! Acts like a man! Faraqa’s eldest daughter has mental problems!”

“I bet you used that to do whatever the hell you wanted!”

“Why d’you think they sent me packing to the south?!”

The two of them burst into laughter again. What kind of a rowdy conversation was this? Blood would probably have fit right in here. But I couldn’t keep up with this. Maybe it was okay to leave it to Menel. He seemed to be handling it well for me.

“Hmm.” Carmela suddenly looked in my direction and cast a glance over my bowl of porridge. “Not making much headway, are you? Come on, eat up! Or is this food not to your taste, Paladin?”

I’d been so overwhelmed by their conversation that I hadn’t yet touched the porridge. Carmela gave me a slightly searching look. I could tell that she was probably testing me, and I couldn’t let that slide.

“Not at all. I just haven’t said grace yet. My apologies.”

“Oh yeah, gotta say grace first. ‘Cause you’re a *holy knight*.”

I put my hands together and prayed. “Mater, our Earth-Mother, gods of good virtue, bless this food, which by thy merciful love we are about to receive, and let it sustain us in body and mind. For the grace of the gods, we are truly

thankful.” Then I took up the spoon and shoveled porridge into my mouth.

The rusty and grassy smell of the bland gruel spread throughout my mouth, but I polished it off in one go. “Thank you very much for the food! Could I trouble you for another bowl?” I banged the bowl back down on the table.

A subtle smile crept onto Menel’s face and he nodded at me. He’d probably picked up on my intent.

Carmela gave a single short laugh. I’d caught her attention. “Go on then,” she said, heaping more into the bowl. “Seconds.”

“Thank you!” I ate it. I placed the bowl down. She filled it again. Again, I ate it and placed the bowl down. I could smell the rust rising from my stomach.

But Carmela grinned at me. “You’re a good eater! You finished off three whole bowls of this crap? Don’t tell me you actually *like* how it tastes?”

“No. While I’m very grateful for your hospitality, I didn’t find it delicious. Also, I have to say, I’m not the kind of person who’s very good at these blunt, in-your-face conversations. But still...” I was a warrior, and I had pride to uphold: the pride of inheriting the sword of Blood the War Ogre. “If you thought I was a pansy who could only put good food to his mouth, I’ll consider myself insulted!”

“Damn right!” she shouted back in retort, then laughed. “I know a warrior when I see one! I let your gentle manner make me doubt your guts. I apologize unreservedly! Drink and make up?” She held her cup of ale towards me.

“Of course,” I replied, bashed my own cup against hers, and downed the rust-smelling ale all in one go. I exhaled with a refreshing “ahhh” sound. “It was a good and filling meal! Carmela, thank you for the food!”

Menel gobbled down the last of his porridge, washed it down with some ale, and exhaled louder than me. “Me, too. That was a blast.”

Carmela laughed. “I dunno how you can compliment this gross stuff. Guess I gotta thank Whirl for bringing me good guests!”

She shook Menel and me by the hand. Her nails were packed with dirt and her hands covered in calluses. They were the hands of a worker.



“The Invincible Giant? He’s here alright.”

Those were the first words out of Carmela’s mouth after we had finished the meal she had kindly provided for us and told her our true reason for coming here.

“First, the river flowing through here—we call it the Red River—yeah, it’s just as bad as it looks. Iron in the water. And we know for sure that to the southwest, on the rocky plateau between us and the mountains, there’s a bountiful spring that pumps out a lot of clean water, maybe from another water vein. Right now that all ends up in the Red River, but if we could come up with some smart way to draw it, this village’s lot would probably improve. And the stuff about the giant making the area around the spring his turf and getting rid of anyone who goes there, that’s true, too.”

Carmela briskly and efficiently went through what we needed to know. So far, it sounded like the majority of the rumors had been true.

“But I ain’t killing him,” she said, taking me by surprise. “You’re right, a few adventurers did hear the rumors, come here, and take on the giant, driven by ambition or something. But none of the villagers wanted that, and neither do I.”

“May I ask why?”

“Of course. Paladin, I heard you slayed the mountain dragon, so of course you remember that soul-chilling howl, right? And the demons you chased from the mountains.”

“Yes.” I nodded.

Without a moment’s pause, she continued. “This is the closest village to the mountains. Beasts gone berserk and demons you didn’t kill swarmed us. Guess why we’re *still here*?”

At this point, I could tell what Carmela was getting at.

“I’m not giving you flack here, but seriously, we should be toast, right? Look where we are and what state we’re in. My martial arts ain’t about to save this village, that’s for sure.”

It was strange that there was even a village surviving in this place directly

northeast of the Iron Mountains to begin with. After the dragon awakened, the beasts went berserk, and the remaining demons scattered everywhere, it was to be expected that they would be destroyed, just another victim of this world's commonplace tragedies, everyday calamities. That was the kind of location they were in. And the reason it hadn't happened that way was probably because...

"The Invincible Giant crushed them all. As intruders on his turf." Carmela's manner of speaking wasn't overly emotional in the slightest. She just continued to share the facts with us in a businesslike fashion. "The giant doesn't open up to people. He doesn't even let us get close. We tried having a dialogue with him, but it went nowhere."

However, I thought I could sense an undertone to her voice now. It felt a little warmer.

"But he isn't our enemy." She had a bit of a happy look on her face. It was a subtle smile that I could barely recognize. "As long as we don't violate his territory, he leaves us alone. If anything comes to break the peace, he'll wipe out those enemies and get back on with life. He gives nothing to us, but takes nothing away. Can you call that an enemy?"

I shook my head. Menel did the same. She was right. The giant was no enemy.

"Sure, the Faraqa family were the owners of this land two long centuries ago. It's said the village thrived, also doubling as a rest stop on the way from the Iron Country to the northern coast. But those were just arrangements made between humans. To him, that spring and that plateau ain't Faraqa land; they're his home, where he lives." Carmela gave a slight shrug. "He's no friend, but he ain't our enemy either. If anything, he's a neighbor."

"And barging into a neighbor's house to kill them and take their things is what a robber does?" Menel said.

Carmela nodded. "Yeah. Well, *he* probably doesn't consider us neighbors. Might even think we're with the adventurers who came for him. But at least, for our part, we want to think of him that way. We don't plan on robbing him."

"That's the right choice, if you ask me," Menel said back. "I really think that. So anyway, question: You said this used to be a rest stop?"

“Hm? Yeah.”

I explained. “We came here partially because of the Invincible Giant, but also because we were searching for an old road linking the north to the Iron Country.”

“Right. Well, there’s the remains of an old stone path. I can tell you where it is, but—” She sighed. “The road goes through his turf.”

We had a problem.



I wavered at the edge of consciousness.

We had a problem. We had a problem, and then—

And then what? What happened after that?

Oh, now I remembered.

We followed the path.

We messed up a little.

We ran into the giant.

He really was invincible...

And strong...

And relentless...

And showed no signs of letting me escape...

It hurt. It really hurt.

It really hit home... how small humans were.

We could defeat a god of undeath, defeat a dragon, and still, even the slightest mistake could break us in an instant, leaving nothing but emptiness behind. We could never be invincible like that giant.

And yet for some reason, despite being undefeatable, that giant seemed—



...

.....

.....

I felt like I'd been having a long dream. Something was blaring inside my head.

"...!!"

The noise throbbed like a heartbeat. It was obnoxiously loud. I tried to open my eyes. All I could see was red.

"...ill!"

Huh?

Before I could give it any thought, excruciating pain racked my entire body. It hurt so bad that I couldn't even scream. Tears spilled from the corners of my eyes as I suffered in agony. My arms hurt, my legs hurt, my stomach, my back, my whole body. I felt as though whole handfuls of iron nails had been driven into every part of me.

"Will! Will! You awake?! Will!!"

Amid all this, I heard a voice. It was Menel's. But I could only hear it from my left. Why was that? Now that I thought about it, my bright-red world was awfully narrow. I could only see the left half of it...

"Pray! Will, pray! Pray!"

Pr...ay? I can't, Menel. How can I pray when it hurts so much...?

"Hurry up and pray! Live! Live, damn you! Don't die here, you fig idiot!"

I was being shaken. My whole body was in pain.

"Will! Will! Feck! *'Thou spirits of life, drink my blood and eat my flesh' ...*" He groaned. "Come on!"

I felt a little warm. The cold came right back.

"Please... Pray, please, Will! Feck, feck! God! God!"

I ached. I hurt. Tears poured down my face.

"Gracefeel! Gracefeel! I... I'm trash! I've lived a no-good life, I probably couldn't hold my head high in front of you if I died!"

And yet... And yet, I felt strangely tired. Incredibly... tired.

A high-pitched noise rang incessantly in my ear.

“But meeting this guy saved me! He made me a bit of a better person! He’s always given everything! You know it! So please! Please!”

The world had gotten awfully quiet. Oh... If I closed my eyes now, it would be heaven. I could just... slip... into sleep. The idle thoughts of my hazy mind told me it would feel... really... good.

“Save Will! Don’t take my friend away! Gracefeel! God of the flame, please!”

Hearing nothing,

sinking under,

letting go,

I closed

my

“Rise!”

A voice cut through my head fog like a bolt of lightning.

“Rise! Rise! Rise!!”

It wasn't a very pretty voice. It wasn't pleasing to the ear.

“Why do you sleep?! Wake yourself—”

It was the voice of a girl who wasn't used to speaking loudly, yelling at me, her voice shaking...

“Rise, my knight!”

I was awakened. This was the one voice I couldn't betray.

If she says to rise, you rise!

If she says do not sleep, you summon everything you have to stay awake!

My soul shouted that at me. Power welled inside me. It was as though a cool breeze had blown through me from my head to my toes. Each and every one of the cells throughout my body seethed with energy.

I opened my red-stained eyes. I could see a red sky and Menel's red face. I twisted slightly. Immediately, the pain that had felt so far-off because of my drowsiness ran straight through my body. It hurt. It really, really hurt. The pain in the right-hand side of my body in particular was agonizing.

I finally realized: my right eye had been half-crushed. My right eardrum had ruptured. I wasn't sure if I could feel anything beyond my right elbow. A sideways swipe from that enormous club had slammed hard into the right-hand side of my body. My bones and flesh had been smashed and torn, and I had fallen down a sharp, rocky slope. Though my body had become a little more resilient through absorbing Valacirca's dragon factor, it was amazing that I was even still alive. Every time my heart beat, it felt like I was being gouged with bunches of nails. Every time I twisted my body, it felt like a branding iron was being held against my skin.

But my god was right beside me. I could feel it. And so I was able to put all

that aside and pray.

Even if it hurts, even if I suffer, so long as you are beside me, I will devote everything to you.

Please tell me what it is you desire, just as you desire it.

Whatever your wishes, however many they are, as long as I have life left in me, I...



I came to under a starry sky of dancing phosphorescence. But my whole body was in pain. I faced the starry sky unable to move, as if floating in it. Far away in the dark sky, at the edge of my expanded perception, I could sense many worlds—universes—crossing paths. Untold numbers of twinkling souls danced across worlds with simple-minded and single-minded purpose.

“...”

As I lay there, I suddenly became aware of a hooded figure sitting unobtrusively beside my head. It was the god of the flame. She was sitting with her legs folded to one side, looking down upon me like a beautiful mermaid resting on a rock near the shore.

“You asked me my desires.”

It seemed that I had come closer to death than ever before. I couldn’t speak. I nodded yes inside my mind. When I did, she rested her small, pale hand softly on my cheek. Her hand was smooth and cold to the touch, but warmth spread into my body from where she was touching. The silence continued a while longer. It was a comfortable silence.

“My knight.”

Yes? I answered internally.

“I want to hold the hands of those who are lonely or weary.”

I understand. Then please, use my arms.

“Your arms are broken. With them broken, you cannot do that, so I will take your ‘being broken’ and the pain of it upon myself.”

I understand. As you wish. When I gave that answer, the pain vanished from my arms.

“I want to walk alongside those beaten down by injustice.”

I understand. Then please, use my legs.

“Your legs are shattered. With them shattered, you cannot do that, so I will take your ‘being shattered’ and the pain of it upon myself.”

I understand. As you wish. When I gave that answer, the pain vanished from my legs.

“I want to offer words of kindness to those at the end of their rope.”

I understand. Then please, use my mouth.

“Your head is cracked. With it cracked, you cannot do that, so I will take your ‘being cracked’ and the pain of it upon myself.”

I understand. As you wish. When I gave that answer, the pain vanished from my head.

“I... I want to praise those who are simply living in earnest, for the simple reason that they are living in earnest, and I want to love them.”

I understand. Then please, use everything I have within my chest.

“Your chest is torn. With it torn, you cannot do that, so I will take your ‘being torn’ and the pain of it upon myself.

I understand. As you wish. When I gave that answer, the pain vanished from my chest.

“My knight.”

Yes.

“I love people.”

...

“I have been here all along, loving people and watching over them.”

...

“I am a god, so I do not grow weary, nor do I tire.”

...

“However...”

...

“However, I... just a little, I...”

...

“...think that I want to be loved by someone, too.”

The words seemed to fall out of her mouth, her voice heartrendingly quiet and shaking slightly.

The moment I heard them, something hot welled up from deep inside my chest.



The pain had receded, but my body wouldn't obey me. It was like sleep paralysis. I commanded my body to listen. Converting the heat rising inside me into energy, I forced my shaky hand to move and my trembling throat to speak.

“...go...d.”

I took hold of the pale white hand that had been resting on my cheek. Maybe that was irreverent. The thought crossed my mind, but I didn't stop. Everything I was belonged to her. If she disapproved of that, she could do what she wanted with me. I didn't care what happened to me.

“You are already loved.”

In a space halfway between dream and prayer, I softly kissed the tips of her white fingers, and—

“Gracefeel... I love you.”

I confessed to her.

She looked down upon me as I lay there. I could fall very deep into those eyes.

“———”

Her beautiful face, framed by black hair, was as expressionless as ever. But to me, she looked a little surprised. The thought that God—my God—could be

taken by surprise tickled me a little.

I thought back, trying to figure out when this had started. It was probably... right at the beginning. Ever since the time we first met.

I had lived an indistinct life and died an indistinct death. She guided me, a sniveling, moaning mess of regret and self-reproach, and silently showed me the path. Each time my knees shook and gave way and I could no longer walk, she turned around and waited patiently for me, the flame of her lantern shining a light on the dark road forward. Back then, I didn't know her face or anything else about her. And that memory was now a part of my previous life, and all in a haze. I couldn't even remember unless I came here. But ever since then...

"I have always loved you."

I had loved her.

"I don't want anything."

I wasn't asking her to return my feelings. I wasn't even dreaming of receiving anything back. If she were to punish me for committing a sin or blasphemy, I wouldn't resist or make excuses.

"But—"

But it was by no means a lie. I had told her I loved her because I wanted her to know, because it was true.

"I love you. Please... let me love you."

"..."

God looked down upon me, saying nothing. I couldn't read anything from her expression, either. And after a while of silence, the word she said was...

"Fool."

I sighed internally. It was obvious. Something like that would never be allowed. There was no way she would accept me. What kind of punishment would I receive? No matter what awaited me, I promised myself I would never regret my choice. I fully resolved myself for what was to come.

The words that followed made my mind go blank.

“I will... suffer thee to do so.”

For some reason, God had returned to her previous stiff style of speech, but I wasn't in a state to think about why.

“Fool. You really are... a fool.”

Yes. I have nothing to say in my defense. My grandfather was hoping for a great-grandchild. He's going to be disappointed.

“I have no body of flesh.”

I'm aware.

“I do not have the strength to form an Echo.”

I'm aware.

“No matter how deep your feelings, you can only love.”

I don't care. I'm ready for that.

But—

“On a day long ago,” I said, “you told me that we would go together. Until this life of mine ends. That's all I want.” I lay there debilitated, looking up at God. Now that I thought about it, this had been a pretty uncool way to confess. “I love you...”

I looked up at her as I thought about how pathetic this was. The young, gentle, black-haired goddess looked back down at me.

“Such a fool...”

And, softly, she smiled.





When I awoke, I was lying flat on my back on soft grass behind some trees. I could hear birds chirping in the distance. The trees formed walls and a ceiling as if they were protecting me, and beams of sunlight were gently shining through. I recognized it as one of Menel's elemental techniques.

What... had happened? My memories of the events from before I woke up here were fuzzy.

Anyway, I thought I'd start by getting up, but when I tried, an irritating dryness in my throat sent me into a coughing fit. I was parched.

"Will... Hey, Will! You okay?! You're awake!"

"Me...nehl..."

As I looked at his face, I remembered. Of course. The giant's club had sideswiped me. And then I went rolling down a rocky slope...

"You sound like shit! Here, have some water!" Menel was holding a drinking vessel made from a large, curved leaf. It was full of water. "It's not that red iron water. Go on, drink!"

He rested one hand on the back of my neck and poured the water from the leaf cup into my mouth. It was colorless, smooth, and smelled faintly of fresh greenery. I gulped it down, drinking so fast that water spilled out from the corners of my mouth, and exhaled loudly when I was finished. I never knew that plain old water could be so delicious.

Laughing, Menel put a hand around my shoulder and mussed up my hair. "I thought you were a goner, damn you!" His eyes looked a little wet.

"Menel... I'm sorry for making you worry."

He laughed it off. "Like I was actually worried! Your prayer worked—your injuries were healed. So you were obviously gonna wake up sooner or later."

"Oh, okay." I thought I'd seen Menel getting fairly distraught, but my memories were a little unclear, so I decided to avoid pointing it out.

"Umm... where are we?"

“The woods in a valley a bit away from that rocky plateau, outside his turf. After he smacked you flying and you fell down, I collected you and ran away.”

As I searched for something to say, he changed topics. “It’s no wonder they call that guy invincible. That’s definitely a giant from the age of the gods. Just like the foul-dragon, he’s not someone people should be carelessly messing with. It was a toss-up whether you’d even survive running into him.”

“Yeah. That was close. I almost died. I guess that counts as a total defeat.”

“Ya. Seriously, you did well to pray in that state.”

“I got the feeling that God was... calling out to me. Saying ‘rise.’”

He chuckled. “Someone loves you.”

It happened the moment he said it. My memories came back.

“.....”

My memories—of that starry sky with dancing phosphorescence.

“.....”

“Hm? Will?”

“.....”

“What’s up?”

.....

“Ah...”

“Ah?”

“Ahhhhhhhh!!” As the memories flashed back to me, each one triggering the next, I covered my eyes and yelled. I felt as if fire were going to erupt out of my face. What had I done? *What had I done?*

“What’s wrong? What happened?! Talk to me!”

“I-In my dream, I—I was talking to the god of the flame...”

“Sure. You’re a priest, you do that sometimes. So what, did you get a serious revelation or something?”

I shook my head. How could I put it? “I... confessed to God that... I... loved her...”

A silence fell.

“Eh, I mean... the god of the flame *is* a goddess.”

“If you don’t know what to say, you can just tell me that, you know?”

“I-It’s not unheard of. It happened in the legends, right? Love with a god...”

“Yeah, a long time ago. In the age of myth.”

“S-So... What was her reply? What’d she say?”

“She said, ‘Fool’...”

Menel went silent. Gently, slowly, he patted me on the shoulder while looking at me with lukewarm eyes. “So first you had a god confess to you and run off before you could reply, and next up, you yourself confess to a god and get shot down. You are... well, let’s just say, you’re something else.”

“I... I wasn’t *shot down*!”

“C’mon, brother, that’s a rejection!”

“She said she’d allow me to think of her that way!”

“*That’s called being shot down!*”

“At the end, she kind of... gave me this really pretty, subtle smile and said, ‘Such a fool...’”

“The hell is that, if not being shot down?!”

What?! The more he said it, the more I started to feel like I’d... completely struck out?!

“And brother, if you’re *gonna* confess, at least think a bit more about the mood and the timing and stuff like that, you know? Well, I dunno if goddesses care about mood and stuff, but you know what I’m saying.”

The truth in his words was painful.

“So, you ran into an enemy, took a nasty blow, almost died, she saved you, you thought, ‘Hey, this feels nice, I like her!’ and were in like a shot with the

love confession? What are you, a virgin? Right, you *are* a virgin.”

I said nothing.

“No fig wonder, then...”

W-Wait, wait. I was pretty sure that wasn’t how it went. It wasn’t a gentle way of turning me down... I thought. No, I was pretty sure! Wasn’t I?

Yeah, if that *was* a rejection, then that would mean I was just incredibly dense and I could do nothing but feel sorry for myself...

But even if that was the case, even if I had been rejected by her...

“It still doesn’t change how I feel.”

The truth was so simple once I’d realized it. For a very long time—since before I was born, in fact—I had apparently been in love with God. I had faith in her and respected her; and at the same time, I adored her and was hopelessly in love with her.

“I can’t imagine it being anyone except the god of the flame.”

I thought I’d better apologize to Gus for disappointing him. A great-grandchild was definitely going to be impossible for me. *I’m so, so sorry, Gus!*

“I’ll probably be like this all my life, so I’ll never stop serving her. Even if there’s nothing in it for me.”

And Menel was right about the confession. I decided that one day, I’d do it again properly—not getting carried away in the moment and hurriedly spewing out my words like this time, but something properly thought out that I’d tell her face-to-face. One day, for sure.

“Yeah. You know, realizing that has made me feel better about it.”

“R-Right...”

“Nope, stop it. Don’t you go looking at me with those pitying eyes.”

“But look, think about it. You fall for a hero, and he’s head over heels for your sister... What’s the god of undeath gonna...”

“Oh—” I got the chills. The cold shiver ran down my spine and throughout my entire body. The thought was terrifying. I couldn’t even imagine how Stagnate

was going to react.

“Good luck, brother. Also, you keep your love triangle the hell away from me.”

“M-Menel! Don’t be like that, be a friend and save me!”

“That’s not even a thing I can do, you idiot!”



In any case, after that discussion was over and I managed to shake off my temporary confusion and excitement...

“So, that Invincible Giant—what are we gonna do? We had a fight with him ‘cause, well, he attacked us, and... ya, that guy’s lethal.”

The conversation turned to this.

“He’s a total unknown,” Menel continued. “And that attack-canceling is disgustingly good. It’s not like I can’t think of other ways to kill him, but...”

“Yeah, me too. If all we had to do was kill him, I could think of a few ways...”

It would depend on the exact nature of his invincibility, but with a little preparation, there were ways to do it. For example, if Menel fully prepared beforehand and used the fae to construct a bottomless bog to lure him into, we could use his weight against him to make him sink and suffocate. Something like that would kill him even if attacks wouldn’t work. And if he had a kind of invincibility that protected him even from that, then we could solidify the bog and bury him to keep him sealed. I could imagine a number of other ideas along the same lines.

“But the local villagers and Carmela don’t want that,” Menel said. “They respect him as a neighbor. So...”

“The most reasonable thing to do would be to leave him alone.”

“Ya. That’d be the best. Sucks that he gets to beat you up and get away with it, but he’s not worth picking a fight to the death with.”

It would mean that the path between the Iron Mountains and Whitesails would be a lost cause, but we could just tell ourselves that we’d checked it and

found it to be unusable and a lost cause from the beginning. There was always the other way around, from Whitesails to Torch Port, from the City of the Dead to Lothdor. Transporting the copper coins and so on would be a pain, but you could travel a lot of the way by water. I was reasonably certain it could be done. Ultimately, this path wasn't usable, so the plan should go ahead using the long-distance route. That was, logically speaking, the best solution, but...

"Sorry, Menel. I'm going to say something unreasonable."

Menel let out a single sigh. "Yeah, yeah, I can guess where this is going. What?"

"I can't bear to leave that giant like that."

There was one thing that stuck out in my hazy memory from those moments after being clubbed and flying through the air. That giant definitely *looked lonely*. He smacked of loneliness. He smacked of exhaustion. So I wanted to do something for him. I told Menel that.

"That guy nearly killed you. You do know half your body was mushed and you were this close to becoming a corpse?"

"Yeah."

"Doing something about him *without* killing him is gonna be even more difficult."

"Yeah."

"And you're doing it anyway because..."

"I swore I'd extend a hand to those in sorrow."

Menel went a little quiet.

"And also, God said she wanted to hold the hand of lonely people."

He held a hand to his forehead. And finally, he said, "It's because you love her, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"You want to impress the person you like, don't you?!"

"Yeah."

There was also goodwill and faith. But that was also certainly a part of it. I... wanted to show off to God.

“I really want to impress her. Like super bad! I want to tell her I super, super love her!”

“Okay, you are seriously losing your head!” Menel held his forehead again and looked up into the sky. Then he looked down, then up again, and groaned.

“Goddamn it. Just—You—Ugh! You *really* are a *huge* pain in the ass!”

“Menel!” My expression was probably so bright that anyone could have told what I was feeling.

“If you don’t have a plan, I am *out* of here. I just *know* you’ve already got one, so out with it!”

“Of course I do!” I gave a strong nod. And then, drawing a deep breath, I shouted, *in the language of the giants*.

“‘*Gangr of the Jotunn, William is here!*’”



“It is know him, Rock of the Pass... uhh... ‘*Kittelsen, the Ancient Crag.*’”

We struck it lucky on the first attempt. I had figured that being a person of the same race who had lived in the same region since old times, he might know something.

After appearing through a fairy trail, a giant dressed in beast hide who was probably three meters tall stood before me. Gangr, a forest giant I had gained favor with after the Valacirca disturbance, kept the greetings and his introduction to Menel short, and answered my question in the positive. However, he found it hard to talk in Western Common Speech and got stuck for words several times.

Grumbling, he said, “Use my words is okay?”

“‘*Okay. I, will, listen. I, will, try, hard.*’ Please, tell me about him.”

The three of us sat on the grass in the valley, Menel and I looking up at Gangr as we talked about the Invincible Giant.

“Sorry to make you do this. The giant’s name is Kittelsen. He is a crag personified, and he has existed since nearly the time of the gods.”

I had to agree. That giant had skin like rock, and his whole body was covered in moss.

“So he is still alive... The poor man.”

“Poor?”

“Uhh... Will? I don’t speak giant.”

“Oh! Hmm... ■■■ ■■■■■■?” Perhaps Gangr had realized something from that brief exchange between Menel and me. He looked at Menel and started speaking in a language I didn’t know. It was a flowing language that had a similar sound to Elvish.

“Ah! ■■■■ ■■■... ■■?” Menel replied fluently.

“Muh-huh.”

It sounded like they understood each other. I asked, “The old language of the fae?”

"Right," Menel replied.

I thought the phonology was similar to the language Menel normally used when calling out to the fairies. I was right. Both Menel and Gangr could communicate with the spirits of nature, so they had a language in common.

The two of them talked for a few more fluently spoken sentences, then shook their heads with a frown. “Yeah, this is no good,” Menel said. “This isn’t meant for conversations between people.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the language of the fae and fairies in the transient world, so the tenses are vague.”

“The now and the pass... uh, *‘It doesn’t distinguish clearly between present, past, and future, or prospective, perfect, and progressive.’*”

“Wh-Whoa...”

That was the kind of language he used to talk to the fairies? It was often said

that elementalists had a unique worldview and didn't value logic as highly as aesthetics, intuition, and other positive qualities beloved by those not of this world. Hearing that about their language made me feel like I was a little closer to understanding.

"So even this language isn't gonna make this go smoothly," Menel said. "But it could be useful when we're not understanding each other."

"So... We'll have to..."

"*'Right.'*"

And so began a horribly slow and frustrating conversation that was a mix of three languages.



According to what I heard from Gangr, the Invincible Giant's name was Kittelsen. No one knew when he was born, but it was said that he had been alive since ancient times, close to the age of the gods, and that he was one of the smaller and weaker giants for the time.

"Seriously?" Menel said.

"I, never lie. Granpa, Gramma—*'My grandfather and grandmother said the same, and it was said by the generations before them.'*"

That was scary, but not unbelievable. A giant who was truly from the age of the gods would be on the same level as an Elder Dragon. The Ancient Crag and Invincible Giant Kittelsen was a threat, but he definitely wasn't as much of one as Valacirca. To humans, they were both like unstoppable disasters, but they differed as much as a large-scale meteor strike and a volcanic eruption.

"*'Kittelsen was not strong and was stuck in his ways. To the rough giants of old, he was a nuisance. To the little people, he was a threat, in possession of terrifying power.'*"

Neither Menel nor I spoke.

"*'As a giant of ancient rock, he is of the same origin as all the rock in the world. That is where that property of his that makes him so threatening comes from.'*"

“What is it?” I said.

Gangr sighed. *“He is Unchanging. Kittelsen cannot be harmed by anything smaller than himself, nor anything without form.”*

Menel blinked, astonished. I was probably making the same expression. We looked at each other, and then, just to be sure we understood correctly, we asked Gangr to clarify. “So what you’re saying is,” Menel said, “no attack from anyone smaller than him works at all? Even though he’s an ancient giant bigger than most things alive?”

“And he repels everything without a definite form, like fire, water, lightning, and things like that... Do I have that right?”

What a being, I thought.

Gangr shook his head heavily. “It is not so kind. *‘According to the legends, not even time in its merciless equality nor the dreadful beasts of hunger and thirst can harm that giant.’*”

“That’s almost perfect immortality, isn’t it?!”

This was crazy!

“But... *‘Is this a blessing for Kittelsen?’*”

Those words made me feel like I’d just been drenched with ice-cold water.

“Shunned by his brethren, feared by those smaller than him, Kittelsen spent a lot of time alone. Sometimes, gods, fae, and even people appeared to make friends with him, but all disappeared in the flow of time. It is little wonder he became so cranky.”

This was a lot to think about.

“Kittelsen does not change. Kittelsen cannot change. Kittelsen will continue to wander. And just as a large rock eventually becomes a pebble, then sand, Kittelsen, once he has been completely worn down, will return to being the ancient crag that is his origin. That is the fate of a giant, just as the storm giants mingled with the wind and disappeared, the lava giants embraced sleep in the depths of the earth, and the cloud giants transformed to bolts of lightning and expired striking down their foes. Kittelsen is an ancient crag personified,

unchanging and invincible. It is rare for any, even the gods, to walk through Time's great river as long as he."

Gangr gave a single sigh. *"We are guilty of the same thing. When Kittelsen drifted onto these shores when I was a child, our tribe feared him and kept our distance. Our former chief made the decision."*

Although I had no idea about Kittelsen's personality, he was a giant with a terrifying 'unchanging' nature. If it had come to battle, their defeat would have been inevitable. For a person charged with the safety of his tribe, the decision not to get close to Kittelsen if they could help it made perfect sense.

"An ancient, great, and pitiable giant—that is Kittelsen. Not even I know what he thinks about today."

We sat there in silence for a while, lost for words. But at the same time, that story had also made me wonder about something. I looked at Menel. He seemed to have caught on to the same thing. "Okay, that's his past," he said. "But why is he protecting that place?"

"Because of an old promise."

"Promise?"

"There used to be a village there. I hear that he made friends with the head of that village, and they made some kind of promise."

I listened intently.

"You two must know history. Two hundred winters past, demons ravaged this land in its entirety. The village fell. All was lost. But Kittelsen keeps his promise. He keeps a promise no one still knows. Even after all has turned to ruins." Gangr sighed and said once again that he thought Kittelsen was a poor man.

"William. Dragon-slaying hero."

"Yes?"

"I truly feel pity for Kittelsen. As one of the same race, I hope there will be salvation for him. I did nothing for him, but my thoughts are with him, and that is no lie." He paused. *"If possible... could you please help him?"*

Quietly, I nodded. "I swear it on the flame."



“My ancestors made a *promise* with the Invincible Giant?!” Carmela shouted, her eyes opened wide in shock.

After we parted ways with Gangr in that valley, we returned to Carmela’s village where the Red River flowed, in search of clues to the giant’s lost promise. The village people had no idea that I had fought the giant and been defeated. Carmela’s reaction to what I told her about Kittelsen after she asked us how our search for the path went proved that. And of course, it appeared completely genuine.

“I’d been wondering why something like that would stay for long in this backwoods place. Right, so it was my ancestors, huh...?”

“I met up with another giant I’m acquainted with and heard this from him. I don’t suppose you’d happen to know—”

“Suppose, nothing. If I knew anything, I’d already be doing something about it, wouldn’t I? I don’t know anything. That’s why I’ve been sitting on my ass.”

“Good point.” That shut me up.

“Anyway, the Faraqas died out near-completely once already. In the chaos two centuries ago, most of the people, both young and old, died protecting their territory and the people in it. It just so happened that there were about three or four men in the north who’d been kept there like hostages from a young age and still had the family name and the rights. The information’s been lost, so as much as I’d love to give you an answer, I can’t. There are no documents, either, before you suggest that.”

Carmela’s words were always sharp and to the point.

“Wow. Isn’t that the end of the trail already, then?” Menel looked up into the air.

If this were, say, a story or a computer game, we might have followed a chain of information on our search for the truth and eventually come across something we could use to persuade the giant. Things would conveniently go well, and everything would click into place like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

But you couldn't expect much more than this from reality. It took very little for information to be lost. It wasn't necessarily the case that oral messages and written notes would be conveniently preserved. It was hard to pass something down a mere two or three generations; for something to have survived two whole centuries would have been a miracle. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been hoping for something, but I just had to accept it.

"Don't worry, it's not the end of the trail," I said. "There's still a way."

"Still a way? If Gangr, who's the same race, doesn't know, and Carmela, who's inherited the village, doesn't know, then what are you saying we're gonna do?"

"Well, I mean, there's someone who *does* know, isn't there?"

"What?" Puzzled, Menel tilted his head to the side for a moment, and then he went wide-eyed. "Y-You can't be serious!"

I was.

"We'll ask Kittelsen."

If nobody knew, then we would just have to ask the person himself and be prepared for things to get a little bit rough.

"Paladin, I've heard the stories about you, but you know who you're talking about, right? A bunch of adventurers have come to take him on. He beat them all and chased them away."

"Ah, please add us to that list," I said. "We ran into him just now and he made us pay for it."

"Huh?" She looked at us in surprise.

Menel nodded. "This guy got bashed and sent flying and almost died and now he wants to go back. What a bonehead, right?"

Carmela gave a dry laugh, then went a little quiet. Then she said, "Every damn person, and I mean *every* one, who's seen that giant's invincibility ran off home. You're the first who's ever considered going twice." Then she started laughing. "Faraway Paladin, you, buddy, are a true warrior—that or a true bonehead!"

Then she asked me excitedly if I had a strategy if we couldn't solve it by talking and he started taking swings at me. I nodded. He was a crag of a giant

who couldn't be harmed by anything smaller than him or without form.
However...

"I do have a plan if it does turn violent."

"You do, huh? So I can leave you to handle this?"

"Yes."

The giant and I needed to have a talk.



Together with Menel, I walked along the old stone path and returned once more to that rocky plateau. We deviated from the old path and walked up a slope with occasional shrubs and patches of undergrowth.

I had already cast plenty of enhancement magic and benediction on us. There was no opportunity to use them last time due to the sudden encounter, but this time, meeting him was the point. There was every chance it could develop into a battle, and so there was no reason not to prepare beforehand.

The slope gradually became steeper. I could hear the faint sound of babbling water. We came to the end of our climb. Clear, pure water gushed out from mossy rocks. Behind them, as though one with the scenery, he sat. His eyes turned towards me. His enormous body rose up. If a hill in a place that didn't get much sunlight suddenly rose up, came over to me, and looked down on me, I imagined it might look something like this. His skin was like rock, and covered in moss so thick it reminded me of fur. A large, plump nose and piercing eyes peeked out from among the moss. His thick arms reminded me of a great and ancient tree. His sturdy legs stood like enormous boulders.

"So you lived." The giant ground his teeth. It sounded like a hundred millstones grinding together. "Minion of the cursed, greedy dragon..."

So that was why he tried to kill me. Now I understood why the giant had been so especially relentless towards us when the other adventurers had managed to escape.

The Invincible Giant grasped his club. His posture told me that this time, he didn't intend to let us leave alive.

“Kittelsen, Ancient Crag!” I spread my arms and yelled out to him.

Surprised by my voice—and more probably by the fact that I’d called him by his name—the giant stopped his imminent charge. His eyes, glinting among the thick moss, were open wide.

I felt a surge of fear. The pain of being clubbed revived in my mind. But I suppressed it. “My name is William G. Maryblood! I am no minion of the foul-dragon, and I do not wish to be your enemy!” Not taking a single step back, I looked up into the giant’s eyes. “I have come here today as the representative of Lady Faraqa, the head of the village downriver!”

“Faraqa...”

“Does this name mean anything to you?!”

The giant fell silent. It seemed to be working.

I rushed into an explanation. I said that I was not a minion of the foul-dragon and had just been cursed by him when I slayed him. I said that the people in the village downriver were definitely successors of the Faraqa line, and that they no longer knew the promise that had once been made with him. And I explained that the adventurers who had challenged him were not sent by the people living in the village.

“So if possible, Lady Faraqa would like to renew and make good on the promise that—”

“I understand.”

Success! We could solve all sorts of problems now without fighting! Or so I thought.

The giant slowly shook his head. “But I cannot believe.”

“Why?!”

“A *human*... killed... that dreadful dragon? I cannot believe. It is too much to believe. I think... this is a dragon scheme...”

I froze for a few seconds, screaming curses at Valacirca inside my head. Behind me, I sensed Menel—who had just been quietly observing until this point—tilt his neck back and look up into the sky again, as if saying, “Hard to

argue with that one.”

I had to agree. The giant’s stance that he couldn’t trust the words of a human with that dragon’s scent made a lot of sense. If someone who stank of Valacirca approached me with a friendly attitude and a convenient story, my guard would also be fully up.

“Maybe you are strong for a human. But a human cannot match the gods... or dragons... or giants.”

“Strength isn’t everything, right?” I hadn’t really wanted to use this argument, but now I had no choice. “If I can break through your invincibility, will you believe that I killed the dragon?”

Kittelsen was quiet for a moment. “I will. If a human can do that.” He nodded. He probably had considerable confidence in his own invincibility. “If you cannot, you will die.”

He fixed me with a forbidding stare. The pressure was terrible. I drew a single breath, and once again, I challenged the Invincible Giant.



He definitely was no ordinary opponent. Roaring in a husky voice that seemed to thunder from the ground itself, he took a storm of swings at me with his massive club. As I ducked and dodged, I called out, “Menel! As planned!”

“Got it!”

I leapt in towards the giant—

“Vastare.”

“Whoa!”

He hammered a vortex of destruction towards me, forcing me to leap away. And—

“Vastare.”

Terrifyingly—

“Vastare.”

Kittelsen—

“Vastare.”

Went for the monstrous method of chaining together Words. He hadn't been remotely serious when fighting with just a weapon. In this world alive with the mystical, those beings that had existed from ancient times truly were unfair.

A horrifying number of vortices of devastation blasted everywhere, ripping through ground and creating huge clouds of dust. Several of the attacks obviously failed and rebounded on Kittelsen himself, but because of his invincibility, they seemed to have no effect on him. This was an attack he could only perform because he was both an ancient giant close to the Primordial Words and also possessed the nature of invincibility. He was just the same as the Echo of the god of undeath I had fought on the day I became an adult. This giant didn't fear self-destruction by magic!

I was forced to admit that I'd been taking him lightly, subconsciously thinking that all I had to do was break through his invincibility trick and I could win. Though he wasn't a giant from the age of the gods in the perfect sense, he was on a similar level to gods and dragons. In terms of ability, it was probably best to assume he was stronger than me. I expected both Menel and myself to die if we allowed this fight to drag on.

Now having a new perspective on the fight, I steeled myself and waited for a chance to attack. As the Invincible Giant continued to shout brutal Words beyond the clouds of dust, I judged my timing and shouted a Word back.

“Tacere, os!”

If there was one thing I could do against an ancient opponent with ridiculous power, it was to stick to fundamentals and use magic cleverly in small amounts. The giant's mouth clamped shut. At the same moment, I leapt in towards his feet, hiding myself in a dust cloud. Having a huge body like this made him both fast and strong, but that huge body itself unavoidably obstructed his line of sight. Even humans have quite a hard time catching puppies or kittens that run about their legs.

The giant gave a frustrated grumble. I was too close for him to use his club, and he wouldn't be able to fire off any Words either, as long as the effect of my Word of Silence remained. Wasting no time in switching to stamping instead, he

lifted his foot.

“*Ligatur laqueus... sequitur!*” I cast the magic of Mystic Rope. I didn’t use this one often. I was lucky to see it fly true. The rope stretched upwards, following the giant’s backbone almost exactly, and entangled itself around his neck. He made a loud, throaty noise of surprise. It had worked. It seemed the giant’s motion-arresting ability wouldn’t activate if we just tangled him up instead of piercing, cutting, or striking. I grasped the magic rope with both hands, took a sharp breath, and pulled down with all my might.

A rope tied around his neck had been pulled down hard from the back while he had one foot in the air trying to crush the opponent running about by his feet. It was obvious what would happen. The giant was thrown violently off-balance.

“*Gnomes, gnomes, slip underfoot!*” Pushing our advantage, Menel cast Slip. The ground rippled. The giant’s leg lurched. And with a yell and a tremendous, earth-shaking thud, Kittelsen fell down.

I had needed to hurriedly adjust my position so he wouldn’t land on me, but even though I was distracted, I didn’t miss the groan of pain that slipped out of his mouth.

“I have *broken through* your invincibility!”

When Menel had thrown fire in Kittelsen’s face during our previous battle and he had fallen backwards, that was the only time that the giant had *groaned*. That had given me a hunch, and now it was confirmed.

The Invincible Giant Kittelsen couldn’t be harmed by anything smaller than himself or without form. That was a troublesome characteristic—after all, it would be almost impossible to prepare a weapon bigger than him. But there was one thing that was without doubt bigger than Kittelsen and had a definite form. And that was *the ground*. Between the ground and a giant, the ground was obviously larger.

“Your invincibility can be broken through by throwing or pushing you down onto the ground.”

As Kittelsen lay there, I asked him if this was good enough for him.

“I see... No wonder... the dragon... was killed.” The Invincible Giant faintly smiled.



“It was not... a hard... promise.” After a while, Kittelsen, the Ancient Crag and Invincible Giant, slowly began to talk. “When I came here, the Faraqa village was starting to be built. Faraqa was a funny man. I guarded the water. He gave me booze. That was the promise.” He had a unique voice that sounded like wind blowing through a deep cave. “I said, humans die fast. Faraqa said, even if he died, his kids, their kids, would give me booze instead.”

Menel and I listened quietly.

“Faraqa said, you are forever, but people are forever, too. Faraqa died, and Faraqa’s kids brought me booze. So I thought, maybe it was true.” The giant of mossy rock slowly closed his eyes. “I knew it was not true. But I wanted to believe.”

I knew how this ended. Two hundred years ago, the village fell, and the Faraqa family almost went extinct. Humans couldn’t live forever. We could attempt to pass things down over generations, but even that was no more than an imitation of eternal existence and fell sorrowfully short of a true eternal being.

“The booze was nasty,” the Invincible Giant muttered. “It was badly made, nasty booze. But slowly, it got better.” He spoke as though carefully bringing out something he’d tucked away deep inside his heart. “What would it be like this year? What about this year? Passing the years became just a little fun. Now, I have not drunk booze for a long time. No one brings it to me.”

A long pause followed. Neither of us felt like breaking it.

“Faraqa, I am always here, waiting for your booze.”

His eyes were focused on someone no longer there.



The next day, I climbed that path again with a barrel of ale on my back. Carmela and Menel walked beside me. We deviated from the old path and

walked up the slope with occasional shrubs and patches of undergrowth. The slope gradually became steeper. I could hear the faint sound of babbling water. We came to the end of our climb. Clear, pure water gushed out from mossy rocks. Behind them, as though one with the scenery, he sat. His eyes turned towards us. His enormous body rose up. If a hill in a place that didn't get much sunlight suddenly rose up, came over to me, and looked down on me, I imagined it might look something like this. His skin was like rock, and covered in moss so thick it reminded me of fur. A large, plump nose and piercing eyes peeked out from among the moss. His thick arms reminded me of a great and ancient tree. His sturdy legs stood like enormous boulders.

He didn't speak.

"Our neighbor, Kittelsen, the Ancient Crag!" Carmela, unfazed by the sight of the still-silent giant, called out to him. "Faraqa has brought you alcohol. Please, have a drink."

I opened the lid of the ale barrel. Carmela filled the horn in her hand. The Invincible Giant reached out with his own enormous hand and took the entire barrel. Now that he was holding it, the barrel looked more like a cup or something.

"It sucks," Carmela said. "I warned you."

"I know." Kittelsen raised his barrel and took a sip of ale. Carmela followed suit. It was that iron-water ale that smelled of rust. I heard the sound of a hundred millstones grinding, the sound of Kittelsen grating his teeth.

"Nasty. Nasty booze," he said. "It makes me cry."

Carmela nodded. "Yeah."

"It is the water. The water is bad."

"I agree, of course."

"You are stupid. Why not use the water here?"

"Can we?"

"You have been. Since old times. There is no 'can.'"

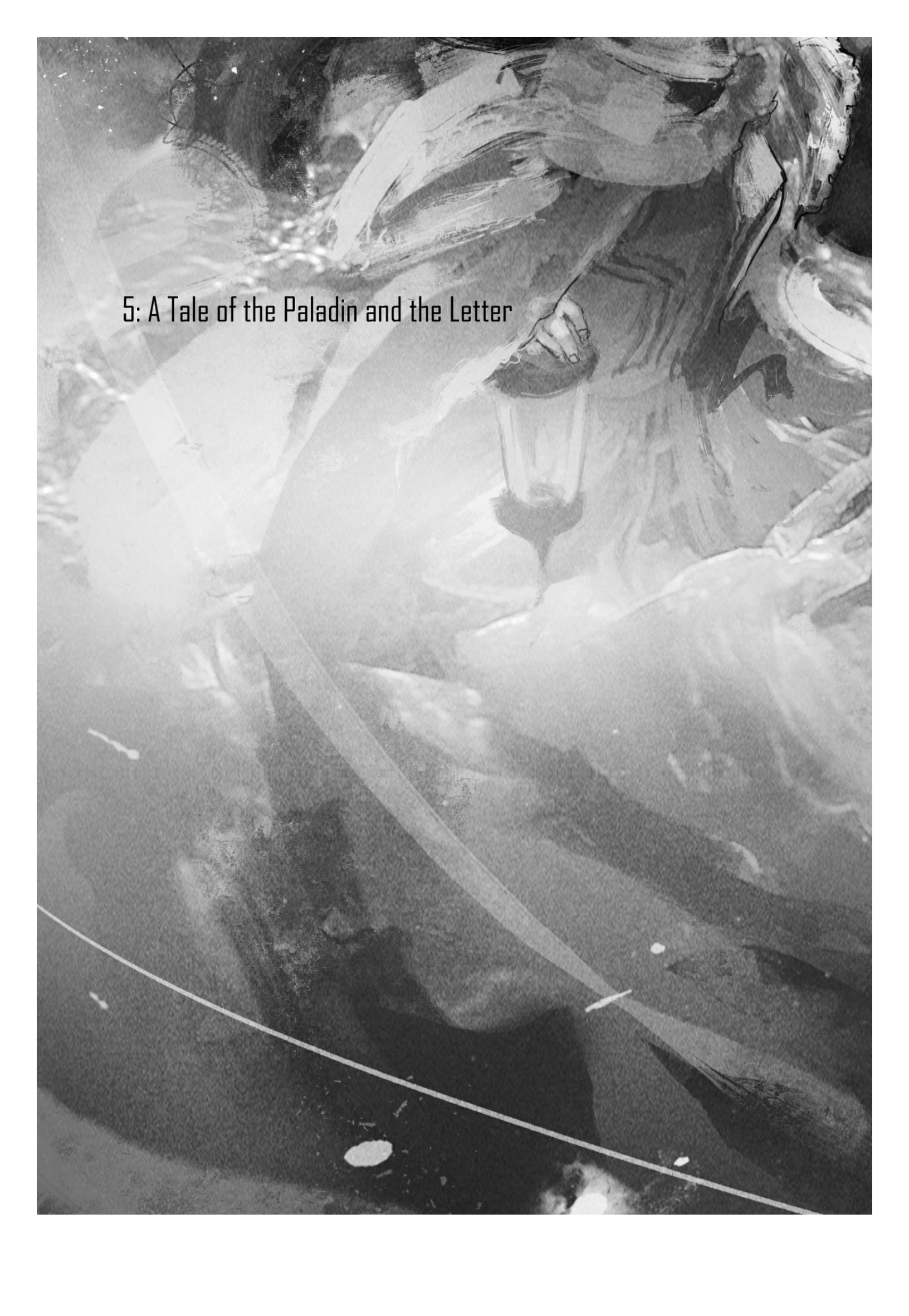
The two of them talked while sharing a drink. Menel and I watched over them

quietly.



This is another story entirely, but just as a footnote—

After this, the Faraqa village once again prospered as a rest stop connecting the Iron Mountains with Whitesails. It became known for its ale, made with spring water. Two barrels are delivered to Torch Port every time the season comes around.

A dark, atmospheric illustration in a painterly style. A hand emerges from the center, holding a glowing, cylindrical lantern. The lantern's light illuminates the surrounding swirling, stormy environment, which is rendered in shades of grey and black with white highlights. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic. The text "5: A Tale of the Paladin and the Letter" is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

5: A Tale of the Paladin and the Letter

“Well, time for me to hit the sack, I guess. Gotta be up early tomorrow.”

After we’d spent a while reminiscing, Menel gathered up his tools and the arrow shafts he’d finished scraping and rose to his feet.

“Yeah,” I said. “Good night.”

“You keep your late nights in check, too.” Menel casually flicked a finger. A tiny glowing ball floated out of the lantern’s magical light. It was a fairy of light, a kind of spirit that dwelled in all sources of light from fire to the sun and even the light of magical lanterns. The floorboards didn’t even creak as Menel left the room on graceful feet and headed into the dark hallway, the weak light of the fairy softly illuminating his surroundings. He now stayed in this mansion like a guest and slept in one of the rooms.

Considering he’d been preparing arrows, perhaps he was planning to go out hunting by himself tomorrow. Spring was the season when creatures coming out of hibernation roamed about. Thanks to the many stories that had been told about him, Meneldor of Swift Wings had a reputation as a famous hunter. Many came to him for help and depended on his hunting skills.

Now alone in my room, I returned to the task of writing. I made good progress working in the silence of night, but it was fairly laborious to write with an inkpot and a quill. I finished up the day’s work while thinking about how great the inventions of the pencil and fountain pen were.

“And done.”

I put my quill down, interlocked my fingers, and stretched. I’d been writing for so long that my body had gotten a little stiff. As I loosened up my body, gently rotating my wrists and shoulders, my eye caught the sheaf of paper I had neatly stacked near a corner of my desk. I stopped.

This was the first paper ever made in Torch Port. What was I going to use it for? I hummed in thought. The quality was slightly too poor to use for a letter, and it was too thick to carry around for writing little notes on. Maybe I could pass some thread through it and use it as a little diary, or maybe a memo for things I didn’t want to forget. In particular, a lot of little things had happened after my fight with Valacirca. The people I’d met, the events that had

transpired, the things I'd seen and heard—maybe I should write those memories down while they were vivid in my mind so they wouldn't one day be forgotten, and so that one day, when I met back up with the people who were important to me, I could tell these stories back to them.

“Oh. That's what.”

Having thought that far, I hit on an idea. It was so simple that I laughed a little at myself, wondering why it took me so long to come up with it. Yes, this was perfect. I had decided. But in that case, how was I going to begin? The first line was always difficult.

Dear Blood and Mary. How have you been?

Yes, this was the right way to start a letter. It may have been uninspired, but I liked it.

After that, the tip of my quill began to flow smoothly. I wrote that I was doing well. I wrote that the land after leaving the City of the Dead and traveling downstream to the north had transformed into a dangerous forest called Beast Woods. I wrote that I fought with demons. I heard all their heroic deeds told through song. I fought with a wyvern in the city of Whitesails to the north. I met many people and came to be called the Faraway Paladin. I rediscovered ruins and was trying to build a town. I met the god of undeath again. Gus was still kicking.

I wrote about how I ventured to the old land of Lothdor and the Iron Country. I battled Valacirca, a wicked, fearsome dragon as old as the gods, and somehow just barely won when all looked lost. I made friends I could laugh with. I was living a happy, fulfilling life. I fell in love with a wonderful woman and confessed to her.

And I wrote that I was sad I couldn't tell them all this face-to-face.

My writing, which had been flowing so smoothly onto the paper, got a little messy.

Blood... If you heard about the feats I accomplished, would you give me a, “You’re the man!”? Would you ruffle my hair and say, “Come on, I’ll give you a fight, show me how strong you’ve gotten,” with those will-o’-the-wisps wavering warmly in your eye sockets?

Mary... Mary... If I said to you, “I made friends!” would you show me a happy smile and say, “Gracious”? Would you hug me and say, “They might be a little surprised by how we look, but it would be lovely to see them, if you’d like to bring them over,” while gently stroking my hair?

I believe that both of you would. But that future—it’s just a sweet fantasy. My chest hurts when I think that now it can never come true.

I miss you. It hurts. Part of me wants this pain to heal. And part of me doesn’t mind if it never does, because I don’t want to forget you, even a little. Will this pain and these feelings one day become a faded memory to look fondly back upon?

On this warm spring’s night, I quietly penned the letter to my late mother and father.

Many things had happened, both great and small. Some would be sung about and passed down by poets; others, deemed too unimportant, the world would never know. But they were all precious parts of my life, and each and every one was a memory I wanted to tell with my head held high.

The Faraway Paladin IV: The Torch Port Ensemble — Finis.



Afterword

To all of you with this completed book in your hands, I am Kanata Yanagino, happy to see you once again. Thanks to all your support, I was blessed with the opportunity to have a fourth book published. Thank you very much.

Due to page count and other reasons, I can't go into much detail, but I steered this volume in somewhat of a different direction from the web version, and stuffed it with all kinds of new scenes written especially for publication. I hope you all enjoyed it.

I'll get right to it: I have an announcement for you all. *The Faraway Paladin* is getting a comic! It will be published in the Overlap web comic magazine *Comic Gardo*. The one in charge of the comic will be Mutsumi Okubashi, who drew the comics for *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash* and *Kado: The Right Answer*! I've already had a look at the storyboard, and it gave me a kind of nostalgic feeling to see Blood, Mary, and Gus, drawn with such a delicate touch, raising Will so energetically. I would be very happy if you could enjoy it hand-in-hand with the novels.

Finally, some acknowledgments.

Kususaga Rin-sensei, who was in charge of the illustrations: I had to catch my breath when I saw the cover illustration. Once again, thank you for such wonderful images. I am so happy to have you drawing Will and the others for me.

Okubashi-sensei, in charge of the comic adaptation: I look forward to working with you.

To all my friends who helped me: Thank you so much for all that you do for me.

To my editor, the editors at Overlap, everyone involved with this book's printing, sales, distribution, marketing, and everything else related, and to you, the person who took this book into your hands, I thank you from the bottom of

my heart.

Praying that we can meet again,

Kanata Yanagino, August 2017

Bonus Short Stories

One Day at the Riverbank

I sat holding a handmade fishing rod and listening to the refreshing sound of babbling water. The bobber floated on the surface of the river, which glittered in the afternoon sunlight seeping through the trees. I had been at this for some time now.

We were in Beast Woods. To give ourselves a break after all kinds of adventuring, today Menel and I had come to a small river to fish. With hastily made fishing rods in hand, we each took up separate positions on some rocks, dangled down our lines, and gazed at our bobs. The trees swayed in the blowing wind, rustling their fresh green leaves. It was a quiet and peaceful moment.

“Oh, here we go,” Menel said as his bob sunk. He gave his line a quick jerk. A trout about twenty centimeters long was caught on the hook. With practiced motion, he pulled the line in, removed the hook, and threw the trout into his basket, which already had several fish in it. I’d caught zero. I could practically hear him smirk and was surprised at how bitter I felt. I pulled up my own line, intending to start over, and realized that something had already eaten the bait and left the hook untouched.

“What am I doing wrong?” Was it the bait, the hook, the line? I fiddled with my equipment as I tried to figure it out.

Menel chuckled. “Fidgety, aren’t you?” he said with a definite taunt in his voice. “Even a fish could tell what you’re thinking, brother. They’re all gonna swim away. Just go for it. Like you’re picking up a girl in town.” He grinned, his jade eyes gleeful.

“Well, I can tell what you’re thinking, too!” I snapped back and continued fishing for a while longer without result. There was just one moment where I thought I’d caught something, but my excitement quickly turned to confusion.

“Ya, you’ve got it snagged,” Menel said. The hook was just caught in some

weeds.

Fishing had kind of a lot of depth to it.

When Menel's basket started to become reasonably full, I finally threw up my hands in defeat and said, "I give up. I guess you have to be used to this kind of thing."

"Huh? You aren't used to fishing?"

"If I'm honest, no."

"That's a surprise." The silver-haired half-elf blinked, a little taken aback. "You have a pretty good handle on outdoorsy stuff."

Blood had certainly made sure I knew how to swim, climb, cut through dense forest, camp, hunt—in short, everything I needed to survive. I could even row a boat if necessary. However...

"I only learned the basics of fishing. We never practiced it much. My dad didn't like sitting around. He was more the kind to dive underwater with a harpoon in his hand." I should add that coming face-to-face with Blood in the dark depths felt vaguely like a horror movie.

"Wow, no patience, huh?"

"So, from the perspective of someone raised as an elf, do I seem impatient to you?"

"Most of the people back where I come from would spend all month, never mind all day, just chatting with fairies with a line in the water," Menel said, recalling the Great Forest that was his old home. "So..."

"That's too patient," I said, unsure whether I sounded more impressed or incredulous. Either way, I shouldn't have expected anything less from elves. They were *the* go-to example of a people who lived long lives and were slow to age. Their sense of time was on another level. "Well, I think I'll stick with this for just a little longer."

"Sure. Good luck."

Picking myself up, I attached fresh bait to the hook and cast it into the river. And I fished while enjoying idle talk with my friend.

Time flowed effortlessly. These moments were surely something I had longed for in my previous world and could never obtain, and it was surely the result of several fortunes that I was even here at all. Under the warm light of the sun, I basked in that everyday bliss. With my fishing rod in hand, I thought of Blood, Mary, Gus, and all the people I'd met up until now, and prayed quietly for each of their futures to be full of happiness.

Then, suddenly, my float moved. Not daring to speak, I hurriedly pulled back. It felt inordinately heavy, and the resistance seemed to grow stronger and weaker. It didn't feel like I'd snagged the line.

"I... I caught something!" I said.

"Is it a big one?!"

I pulled as hard as I could. The rod bent. There was a loud splash and a spray of water. And it leapt out at me: a thick body plastered with mud and covered in weeds; spiky, protruding scales; and rows of long, thin, sharp teeth in a mouth that looked like it could swallow a person whole. It was, to put it bluntly, an enormous sea serpent. And moreover, it was obviously a beast.

The mud serpent and I stared at each other for a moment in shocked silence. Then, all at once, I yelled, the serpent lunged and snapped its fangs, and I leapt away from my rock in panic, tossing the fishing rod aside.

Its fangs grazed my back just now! They came this close!

"Spear! Spear!"

Beast Woods, seriously, give it a rest!

"Fig, you heroes! Why does danger love you so much?!"

"Don't blame me!" I shouted and yelped in panic again as I dodged another vicious bite. Grabbing a short spear I'd propped up nearby, I faced the mud serpent. Apparently this area was still too dangerous to let me spend a day in peace.

"But a catch is a catch! I'll have you for dinner!" I charged at the mud serpent with my spear in hand.



Side note: Beasts are surprisingly tasty.

Poetry is Forever

Whence hailed he? To what hath his eyes borne witness? His arms are forged like the toughest steel, his hand holds a glittering blade of ice. By the unseeable celerity of his draw, evil's pawns are stricken through. Whirlwind, The First Move Killer, Strider... Reystov the Penetrator. No swords clash afore him; naught lies there but the corpses of fallen foes clutching the holes in their chests.

— The opening lines of a troubadour's tale in a Whitesails tavern



During a feast one day after we had resolved a host of problems, I suddenly got curious. "You have a lot of exploits under your belt, right, Reystov?"

"Mm." Reystov, sitting in a corner of the venue and holding a drink, nodded with his lips tightly shut. Recognizable by his dirty cloak, his unshaven face which gave no clues to his age, and the well cared for sword he carried, the man known by the nickname of the Penetrator was a pretty reticent person.

"I'd like to hear the stories of your earlier adventures," I said. Reystov didn't normally talk much about his achievements, and I wondered what kind of adventures he'd had. "Do you think you—"

"No." He quietly shook his head. "Blowing your own horn is a bad habit. It leads to arrogance."

"And arrogance dulls your blade?"

"Right." Reystov nodded, keeping his words to a minimum. He had an imperturbable, dignified presence, like a rock covered in moss. I didn't get any sense that he was interested in gaining fame by talking up his achievements. These were the words of a person who was less concerned with his present self and more with adding another thin sheet to his pile of training to make his sword sharper for tomorrow. As a fellow warrior, I could admire that.

“That again?!” Bee broke into the conversation. “This is why you’re no good. You’re so hard to make material for!” Judging by the slight color in her cheeks, it looked like she had a little drink in her.

“Oh, the troubadour.”

“Robina! Would you please remember my name already?!”

“Right.”

“You two know each other?” They were certainly acting that way. I looked at them in surprise.

“She interviewed me a few times.”

“And every time he’s like this! You... gloomy bore!”

Reystov didn’t appear to take Bee’s unreserved comment badly. He just slowly shook his head. “I won’t be any different the next time, either.”

“You’ve got all kinds of nonsense spreading about you,” Bee said. “You have a poet as great as me here offering to produce something a little closer to the truth for you, and you give me the brush-off. Honestly.” Bee exaggeratedly shrugged her shoulders, looked up into the air, and heaved a sigh. “Reputation’s important for an adventurer, isn’t it? Whether you’re just surviving or trying to make it big!”

“If you have skills, it comes naturally.”

“You *know* there are loads of skilled people who painted themselves into a corner when they let their bad reputation precede them! Look, I know you could be the greatest swordsman in Southmark with one hand tied behind your back, and I’ll admit I’m not saying I want to make a story for you *just* out of charitable good will, but seriously, you’d better think about how other people look at you! You never know what’ll be your undoing if you’re a warrior, do you?!” After rushing all that out in a single breath, Bee whipped around to look at me instead. “Don’t you think so, Will?!”

“Umm...” What Bee was saying made an awful lot of sense considering she was drunk, but I could also understand that Reystov probably wanted to devote the resources he’d have to spend on dealing with Bee to his sword instead.

Since I couldn't fully side with either of them, I attempted to change the topic a little. "So there's a lot of nonsense being spread about Reystov's exploits?"

Bee nodded. "This guy, he takes on a hunting request for some big beast, wanders casually out, strikes through the weak spot first time, and comes back, right?"

Ah, I could picture the problem.

"Carrying back the corpse of the beast uses other people, but he doesn't fight alongside others much, and even when he does, he works so fast that most people can't even tell what's going on. And he takes jobs all over, so..."

"It keeps getting embellished?"

"Yep. I try to find information, but there's so many blanks. So in the end, everyone just has to fill in the gaps with their imagination about what kind of life he leads, who he is, where he's from, what started him adventuring... all of that." Bee sighed. "I might dramatize it a bit, but I wanted to go for something a li'l more grounded..."

"Not interested."

"This is exactly what I'm talking about."

This was going nowhere.

Bee groaned. "If I only had a little more material, darn it."

As I looked at her, an idea occurred to me. "Well, okay then, what about this to liven up the party?"

"Huh?" Bee tilted her head, confused.

As Reystov regarded me with suspicion, I made the following proposal.

"The Penetrator versus the Paladin."

Bee's eyes lit up.

"You'll accept, I assume?" I asked him.

“You’re stronger than I am. How could I refuse?” Reystov gave a wry smile, reluctantly playing along.

We both took up suitable-looking tree branches and rose unsteadily to our feet.

“Oh, this is good! This is great! I’ll turn it into a story that’ll be told for centuries, millennia, no, until the end of time!”

Hearing Bee’s excited shouts, the other people at the feast gathered their gazes on us. We stepped closer. The mighty blade trained by Blood crossed paths with a thrust of brilliant purple lightning, and the air filled with excited cheers.

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